

The City as Art

Review by D. Eric Bookhardt

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In the longstanding debate over what is art and what is a craft, the rule of thumb is that crafts are primarily useful or decorative, whereas a work of art has a deeper resonance in the way that a great poem conveys more levels of meaning than a mere limerick. In other words, art touches on something ineffable or sublime, something not easily expressed in ordinary language. Yet the crafts of the past can also attain art status as fine antiques, after time and nature have imparted their unique patina.

The same applies to antique buildings, and locally whole neighborhoods sometimes display an amazing smorgasbord of styles and construction matched only by the diversity of the people who live there. While the builders of old New Orleans came from many races and nations, and our architecture reflects all of their backgrounds, their creations reflected especially strong local Creole influences. In fact, our greatest brick and plaster masons, as well as some of the most accomplished ironsmiths, wood workers and roofers, were Creoles of color, and their contribution is celebrated in this *Raised to the Trade* expo of Creole building arts at the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA).



Photographs like Walker Evans' House on St. Charles Avenue at NOMA's Raised to the Trade exhibition are classic works that provide a context for New Orleans' unique cityscape.

No, this isn't just a feel-good multicultural thing. When it came to craftsmanship, the Creoles had the Touch, the gift for getting it just right, and their facility with brick, mortar, iron and plaster gave much of this city (especially the French Quarter) its

unique look. After all, New Orleans had a big middle class of free black building tradesmen long before the Civil War, but their legacy is not an easy thing to convey in a museum show, and this particular expo is only partially successful. Yet, as a tribute to the collective creative genius of this city and its people, it is long overdue.

Many of us have experienced the epiphany of walking down a quiet part of the Quarter on a cool, clear day, marveling at the play of light on the texture and the details, the overarching fan windows, medieval-looking rams' horn hinges on antique doors and sinewy wrought-iron brackets holding up balconies dripping with tropical foliage. What this exhibit offers is a behind-the-scenes look at how those buildings were created. A catalog that is an insightful tome in its own right traces their stylistic currents to Europe, Africa and the Caribbean, noting that our ubiquitous shotgun houses appeared only after numbers of Haitian refugees began arriving at the end of the 18th century. Although shotguns are considered Southern, Louisiana is the capital of the genre, and shotguns are believed to be of Caribbean origin.

Scattered among the exhibits on millwork, masonry, iron work and the mysteries of plaster are paintings and photographs by the likes of William and Ellsworth Woodward, Clarence John Laughlin, Walker Evans and Arnold Genthe; classic works that visually link the often-technical exhibits with the cityscape itself. Included are some vintage site plans with watercolor illustrations by Adrien Pursac or Louis Surgi, on loan from the notarial archives; delicate gems in their own right. There is also a large display of images of outstanding modern buildings that, while exemplary, seem somehow out of place in this show, perhaps because they reflect mostly imported styles rather than our own indigenous architectural gumbo. More relevant is a suite of images titled *The Builders*, by Jacob Lawrence, based on his observation of New Orleans construction tradesmen during his extended sojourn here in 1947. So began a theme that for Lawrence persisted as his signature opus for decades thereafter.

An important footnote, not emphasized in the show itself, but covered in the catalog in an excellent essay by *American Routes* radio show producer Nick Spitzer, is the traditional role of the building trades in nurturing New Orleans musicians ranging from traditional jazz greats such as Edward "Kid" Ory and Johnny St. Cyr to Mardi Gras Indian chief Allison "Tootie" Montana, among others. Music was a notoriously fickle business, but in this city at least there has always been a cadre of musician-tradesmen who maintained a distinctive rhythmic pace while they worked. For this reason, Spitzer even compares traditional Creole construction to a kind of "performance art," which sounds a bit far fetched, but which may actually help explain why what we see from the streets does indeed seem so rhapsodic at times.