INTRODUCTION

Among the politer terms of abuse, there are few so effective as "sentimental."
—I. A. Richards, Practical Criticism (1929)

In the Palace of Fine Arts at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, one work of art consistently drew crowds: Thomas Hovenden’s *Breaking Home Ties*, 1890 (fig. 1). Set in a humble farmhouse interior, this image of a mother bidding farewell to her city-bound son was by nearly every account the most popular painting at the fair. Few of the nation’s prominent art critics chose to address it, but reporters from across the country, some acknowledging up front that they knew little about art, devoted long paragraphs to its narrative, describing the scene and the emotional and psychological state of each figure. Some confessed that lumps rose in their throats as they gazed on it; almost all recounted the tears shed by others. Lips quivered, eyes welled, even “strong men” cried openly before it. Many were moved by the scene to share with those around them their own experiences of leaving home—“the ‘heart-break’ chapter of their own lives”—their memories of families left behind, in some cases never to be seen again. The painting created a community of feeling, striking “the chord which makes all hearts akin, sympathy,” as one Chicagoan said. It connected viewers to each other and to a shared past, one that seemed to be receding ever more quickly, driven by the very forces, including advancing technology, being celebrated elsewhere at the fair.

Most of us would immediately identify *Breaking Home Ties* as sentimental. For many, this designation carries at least a trace of condescension and dismissal. Hovenden’s painting is exactly what we expect of sentimental art: a heart-tugging domestic genre scene, set in the country, addressing a familiar subject in a realistic, easily comprehensible style, endorsing traditional values in resistance to social change, and appealing to a popular

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This is not the sort of sentimental art that will form the primary focus of this book. Rather than dwelling on artists such as Hovenden, Lily Martin Spencer, and Eastman Johnson whose domestic and rural scenes are widely accepted and discussed as sentimental in the current literature, I concentrate on artists and genres whose sentimental dimensions have long been ignored, suppressed, and denied.

Over the course of the last 150 years, “sentimental” has become one of the most negative terms used in the field of art history and criticism. From the advent of modernism to the present, the word has carried such disapproving connotations that we have been blinded to the diversity and value of sentimental art, of which Breaking Home Ties represents only one variety among many. My aim in this book is to rehabilitate the sentimental, expanding and transforming our understanding not just of the term, but of the genre’s place in the art and architecture of the United States. From the Revolutionary War to World War I, its presence was far more pervasive, its influence more powerful, its cultural work more consequential, and its manifestations more complex than any account has yet acknowledged.

Animosity toward sentimental art emerged first in France in the mid-nineteenth century in tandem with the rise of realism, formalism, and the avant-garde. This attitude of disdain took some time to cross the Atlantic, taking firm root in the United States only around the turn of the twentieth century. In the following decades, modernist attacks on the sentimental intensified to the point that it became the abject other, both beyond and beneath notice. The word came to serve as a catchall for nearly everything that modernism scorned: the popular, the commercial, the feminine, the domestic, the tenderly emotional.

Clement Greenberg, the powerful midcentury advocate of formalist abstraction, conflated sentimental art with kitsch, dismissing it as intellectually lazy, morally complacent, and aesthetically deficient.3 In contrast to the innovative, intellectually challenging work of the avant-garde, kitsch, as Greenberg defined it, is low- or middlebrow, trite, shallow, formulaic, offering cheap emotional stimulation to those unable or unwilling to engage in serious intellectual response; it is both a symptom and a product of mass culture. “To oppose kitsch,” wrote the critic Harold Rosenberg in 1959, “makes one appear automatically a champion of the arts.”4 The Oxford English Dictionary continues to define “kitsch” as “garish, tasteless, or sentimental art, objects, or design,” and other dictionaries offer “sentimentality” as a synonym. In this formulation, “sentimental” is a form of indecorous emotional pandering, seducing gullible viewers with an appeal to their softer emotions.

During World War II and its aftermath, when the nationalist propaganda of Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union exploited sentimental imagery and its emotional appeal to shared sympathies to advance their agendas, many intellectuals came to consider it not just insipid but dangerous, a means by which totalitarian regimes could manipulate the

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Fig. 1.
masses. So tenacious have these negative views of the sentimental been that in the early 2000s artist Kiki Smith declared it a “maligned territory,” one of art’s last taboo subjects. As recently as 2015, photographer Sally Mann expressed her wariness of “the deadly minefields of sentiment, that most disputed artistic territory.” For serious, ambitious artists like Mann and Smith, to engage the tender emotions associated with the sentimental is to risk condemnation and ridicule. The sentimental may be legitimately invoked only in ironic terms, such as pop artist Roy Lichtenstein’s images of teary-eyed comic-strip women expressing their hopelessness and despair in speech bubbles.

Yet the sentimental has not always been regarded with such suspicion and scorn. “Sentiment,” a thought prompted by a feeling, is an old word dating back to the Middle Ages. “Sentimental” appeared much later—in mid-eighteenth-century Britain—and was used from then until the early years of the twentieth century to mean, in its simplest sense, “full of or appealing to tender feelings.” In 1811, a Boston newspaper explained to its readers that “sentimental” means “the language [of] the heart.” More deeply, the sentimental is about human connectedness—connectedness to others, to place, to the conditions of our existence; it involves a forging of bonds across divides of time, space, and difference. It asks us to conceive of ourselves in relation to others, to imagine ourselves in their place and to feel for them, in some measure, as for ourselves, recognizing a common and shared humanity. It is a means by which to relate to and apprehend the world.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the sentimental was animated by and invested with socially transformative ambitions, and assumed powerful and prominent roles in American society. Politicians, writers, and artists sought to rouse sentimental feelings to unify the nation during and in the wake of devastating wars. Military leaders were moved by the sentimental to rethink their treatment of captured and wounded opponents. Social reformers relied on it to rouse the public to action, to convince them to help alleviate the suffering of others, including slaves, prisoners, laboring children, and abused animals. Etiquette books, children’s primers, and Sunday sermons sought to cultivate tender, sympathetic feelings in the nation’s citizens, in part to counter what some considered the heart-hardening impact of such forces as urbanization and market capitalism. Sentimental values played a central role in reshaping the family from a patriarchal, disciplinary institution into a more egalitarian unit, its members bound by mutual affection. American writers of every genre—poetry, drama, novel, essay—responded to the sentimental’s values and ambitions, following the lead of their British counterparts, including Laurence Sterne and Oliver Goldsmith in the eighteenth century and William Makepeace Thackeray and Charles Dickens in the nineteenth.
The sentimental's emphasis on sociability and mutual support stimulated the creation of, and soaring membership in, a host of fraternal and other social organizations, such as the Odd Fellows, the Freemasons, and the Washingtonians (a widely popular mid-nineteenth-century society that drew together alcoholics to support each other as they sought to give up drink). Sentimental appeals advanced the building of schoolhouses, churches, hospitals, rural cemeteries, and public parks, as well as the preservation of important historic sites, such as Mount Vernon. Cultural historian Shirley Samuels rightly describes nineteenth-century sentimentalism as a “national project,” though its ambitions extended beyond the boundaries of the nation-state to envision affectional bonds stretching across the Atlantic and around the globe.

During the many decades covered by this book, the word “sentimental” was used descriptively, appreciatively, and pejoratively. As its dramatically varied use suggests, the proper place of the sentimental in American society was the subject of constant and vigorous public debate: What value, what roles should the feelings be accorded in the private and, most particularly, the public sphere? In the US political realm, the word at first was used largely in a positive sense, summoning the sentimental bonds of affection that many hoped would unite the citizens of the new nation. It was most often allied then with such other words as “patriotic” and “moral.” By the 1830s, however, newspaper editors and legislators were already slinging it as a derogatory term, accusing abolitionists of being “dues of a lachrymose sentimentality” and of promoting what South Carolina senator John C. Calhoun called “sentimental legislation” against the slave trade. Opponents of the Mexican War (1846–48) were labeled “sentimental bewailers of bloodshed” given to “puling sentimentality about Mexican wrongs and American atrocities.” These detractors claimed that sentimentalists were moved only by emotions, while their own positions were grounded in stern-minded, rational, practical considerations. This use of the word persists today. As just one example, in 2016 an irate poultry farmer described proponents of cage-free eggs as “sentimentalists’ interfering in the raising of livestock.”

When it comes to the visual arts, however, in the United States “sentimental” was used almost exclusively in a descriptive or positive sense into the later nineteenth century. While many would have banned the softer emotions from politics, most considered the attempt to move or touch the viewer a legitimate, indeed expected, aim of art. Eighteenth-century French writer Denis Diderot expressed his desire for art that would “move me, astonish me, break my heart.” Nineteenth-century British critic John Ruskin called for a “noble Picturesque” that would infuse landscape and genre painting with “sympathy” and “heart.” And the editor of the American magazine Appleton’s Journal insisted in 1878 that the “true and lasting value of painting” lies in its ability “to link itself closely to the heart
of the spectator.” These and other powerful and prominent voices argued for the essential role of feeling in the creation and appreciation of art. They contended that art should grow from what Ruskin called the creator’s “communion of heart with his subject,” and should catalyze sympathetic connections among artist, subject, and viewer.

“Sentimental art” is defined neither by style nor by subject. It is not bound to particular techniques, mediums, or materials. Rather, it is art that employs a mode of address intended to develop empathetic bonds and to represent and elicit the “softer emotions,” among them tenderness, affection, pity, compassion, patriotism, and nostalgia. This is the view of sentimental art that prevailed in the United States into the late nineteenth century, when modernism recoiled from the sentimental and caricatured it as the artistic equivalent of tepid pablum dispensed by tenderhearted women in nurseries and sickrooms.

Adherents to both realism and formalism, the two major modernist movements in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, vilified the sentimental and defined themselves against it. They devalued its appeal to tender feelings as an aim unworthy of art. In rhetoric laced with elitism and misogyny, they claimed that sentimental art appealed primarily to women, immigrants, and the lower classes. They located its artistic expression in genre scenes of happy families and barefoot boys, and in popular commercial art: calendar prints, greeting cards, and, by the mid-twentieth century, television soap operas—forms that were seen as particularly appealing to women. Literary historian Suzanne Clark contends that “this reversal against the sentimental helped to establish beleaguered avant-garde intellectuals as a discourse community defined by its adversarial relationship to domestic culture.”

In the opening years of the twentieth century, just as modernism was taking firm root in the United States, critics such as Charles Caffin and Sadakichi Hartmann were writing the first substantial histories of the nation’s art. They were doing so at a time of pervasive concern about the growing feminization of American culture, a concern particularly acute among male professionals in the art world, where women were assuming increasingly prominent roles. Having absorbed modernism’s contempt for the sentimental, they constructed their narratives around what they considered the “manly” realist strain in American art, mentioning the sentimental only as a weakness, a failing of less accomplished artists. In establishing their canon of worthily masculine masterpieces—objective, scientific, “muscular” works—they elevated Thomas Eakins’s Portrait of Dr. Samuel D. Gross (The Gross Clinic), 1875, to the status it continues to occupy today as one of, if not first among, the greatest American paintings (fig. 2). Its elevation at that moment seems especially significant, since, more explicitly than any other work of art produced in the United States to that point, it disparages emotionality, which it binds to the feminine by con-
trasting the patient’s cringing mother to the calmly rational and heroic scientist and surgeon Dr. Gross. These critics, suppressing the strong strain of sentimental sympathy in Eakins’s late portraits, lauded him for being “coldly and dispassionately analytical” and celebrated his “brutality” as an antidote to the nation’s plague of “blasé, sweet-caramel artists.”

The Gross Clinic emblematizes the masculinist culture with which these critics sought to identify themselves, and which they promoted and endorsed through their writings.

Thus was modernist disdain for the sentimental inscribed almost from the beginning in the published story of the nation’s art. Even the most recent textbooks in the field maintain this stance. They validate as unsentimental the figures at the core of their narratives: “Without indulging in sentimental melodrama, [Winslow] Homer . . .” And, to the extent that they engage sentimental art, they center it in nineteenth-century feminine domestic culture, particularly in the work of genre painters such as Lily Martin Spencer. As one author puts it, “In painting, sentimentalism is exemplified in the work of Lily Martin Spencer . . . [Her] images glorify the domestic piety of female-dominated sentimental culture.”

These narratives often deploy the term “sentimental” as the bad opposite to something better, as when one scholar states that Mary Cassatt’s “paintings of mothers and children are not sentimental depictions, but rather serious, and often monumental, renditions of the processes of nurturing that were women’s socially prescribed tasks.” The artist, in other words, is serious because she is not sentimental. In the following pages, I hope to make clear that these views give us a limited and misleading understanding of the sentimental and its place in American art.

For more than a hundred years, from the late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century, the sentimental was one of the most vital, protean, productive forces shaping the nation’s art. It defined for art an activist, interventionist role in the public realm. It ascribed to art the power to touch, educate, and transform its audience’s feelings, to connect them to others, and, through these means, to effect social change. For artists such as Charles Willson Peale and John Trumbull, who deployed their sentimental creations in the urgent effort to stabilize the Union in the wake of the Revolutionary War, the modernist conception of the art experience as an isolated individual’s aesthetic response to “color space relations”—as American cubist Stuart Davis described it—would have seemed extraordinarily impoverished.

The sentimental’s influence was pervasive, touching almost every category of subject matter—history, portraiture, landscape, genre scenes, religious art, animal imagery—and a wide range of media, including painting, sculpture, printmaking, photography, architecture, and landscape design. Scarcely an artist was untouched by it. Even at the end of the nineteenth century, when hostility toward the sentimental was beginning to take hold, artists
worked in keen awareness of its commercial potential and popular appeal, negotiating sometimes complex relationships with it, as was the case with Winslow Homer, John Singer Sargent, and Mary Cassatt.

The sentimental’s rhetorical power was recognized and used by artists from an array of communities, including black abolitionists and white apologists for slavery, advocates of “woman’s sphere” and campaigners for women’s rights, commercial advertisers and critics of market capitalism. That is to say, the sentimental was (and is) politically multivalent. Some have cast it as a mechanism of white middle-class hegemony. It was that, but much more, including an agent of radical social reform.

The sentimental was as important to the reception as it was to the production of art, shaping audience expectations and responses. Viewers raised or trained within what Shirley Samuels has called “the culture of sentiment” tended to approach works of art expecting and desiring to be moved.24 In responding to the subject matter of pictorial art, they drew on their own physical and emotional experiences to project themselves imaginatively into the represented world, attempting to feel with and for the characters in the artwork. The viewer’s trickling tears or quickened heartbeat were not embarrassments, but rather signs of an awakened humanity. To respond to sentimental art was a fully embodied imaginary, emotional, and sensory experience.

In the six chapters that follow, I examine the varied and shifting forms that sentimental art has assumed in the work of artists and architects in the United States, as well as in the work of selected Americans active in Britain and France. The temporal scope is from the late eighteenth century—when sentimental art was widely admired and fully participating in the remaking of the social and political order—to the early twentieth century, when modernist rhetoric convinced serious artists to feel ashamed of any engagement with the sentimental, at which point it became, as Sarah Burns has written, part of “an alternative aesthetics of the popular.”25 The chapter arrangement is broadly but not strictly chronological, with chapters 2 and 4 breaking the temporal arc to follow their individual topics from the antebellum era to the cusp of or into the twentieth century.

My opening chapter addresses the history paintings, portraits, and various public spectacles created by Peale and Trumbull in their efforts to support the formation and continuing viability of the new United States. Chapter 2 concentrates on the relations between sentiment and social reform, especially on racist and antiracist imagery, including abolitionist woodcuts, romantic racialist illustrations, and Henry Ossawa Tanner’s genre and religious paintings. Tanner’s works both advocate for the national acceptance of African Americans’ humanity and dignity and, in those works produced during his years as an expatriate in France, push back against the virulent anti-Semitism of the era. Chapter 3 turns...
to architecture and landscape design, and to the social and political value accorded “home feeling” in the antebellum era. In the 1840s and 1850s, Andrew Jackson Downing designed houses and residential grounds that were meant to both symbolize and facilitate the formation of sentimental domestic bonds. He hoped that his sentimentalized homes would help counter the feverish pursuit of wealth and the “spirit of unrest” that he felt were destabilizing the nation.

Chapter 4 focuses on landscapes: the new rural cemeteries, the paintings of the Hudson River School, and the Barbizon-inflected works of George Inness, all invested by their creators with healing ambitions. Over the period covered by this book, various sentimental emotions rose to the fore, then receded: patriotism, sympathy, home feeling. This chapter considers the increasing prominence of nostalgia from the antebellum years into the late nineteenth century. In chapter 5, I consider the case of Winslow Homer, an artist who has been consistently described as unsentimental in the scholarly literature from the early twentieth century to the present. I argue that he was engaged with the sentimental throughout his career, and that he is, in fact, one of the greatest of American sentimental artists. Since antipathy toward the sentimental arose first in France in the mid-nineteenth century, in chapter 6 I turn to Paris, where Sargent and Cassatt were among the first American artists to confront and respond to it.

My understanding of the sentimental draws on and extends the work of a number of important scholars, most from outside the discipline of art history, who since the 1980s have fought entrenched modernist contempt to excavate, rejuvenate, and rehabilitate it. The philosopher Robert C. Solomon dissects the “century-old prejudice” against “sentimentality and the emotions” and defends them “as essential to life.” Jane Tompkins, in her book Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860 (1985), challenges modernist standards of literary value, asking us to consider the important cultural work taken on and accomplished by sentimental texts. The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America (1992), an influential collection of essays edited by Shirley Samuels, makes a compelling case for sentimentalism’s centrality to nineteenth-century US culture. Three other important essay collections—Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler, eds., Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture (1999), Milette Shamir and Jennifer Travis, eds., Boys Don’t Cry? Rethinking Narratives of Masculinity and Emotion in the U.S. (2002), and Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher, eds., No More Separate Spheres! (2002)—have done much to deconstruct the long-standing association of the sentimental with femininity by calling attention to American men’s participation in a range of sentimental cultural practices. Other scholars, such as
Joycelyn Moody in *Sentimental Confessions* (2001), have examined the adoption of sentimental literary conventions by African American writers.

A number of historians and literary scholars, including Michael Bell, David Denby, Markman Ellis, Sarah Knott, David Marshall, John Mullan, and William Reddy, have clarified the sentimental's origins in the Enlightenment theory of moral sentiments and the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility, while establishing its vital role in the dramatic social and political upheavals of that time, including its undergirding of the French and American Revolutions.27 James Chandler has extended its reach from the philosophy and literature of eighteenth-century Britain through the writings of Charles Dickens, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf into the Hollywood films of Frank Capra.28 Lynne Festa, Renato Rosaldo, Laura Wexler, Marcus Wood, and others have fixed attention on the dark side of the sentimental, emphasizing its complicity in imperialism, colonialism, violence, and repression—its use as a tool, not to liberate others, but to control them.29

The pioneering work of literary scholars has done much to shape my understanding of the sentimental. In one area, however, my views depart from theirs. Many have identified sentimental literature with distinctive formal constructions, generally including clichéd plots, stereotyped characters, exaggerated emotional displays, familiar and accessible language, and the “careful management of points of view.”30 These are, for the most part, traits that set sentimental writing so defined outside the compass of “good” literature. For decades, art historians, aware of this definition of the sentimental, sought artistic parallels, finding them primarily in genre scenes of domestic and country life. This reinforced the impression that the sentimental was but a minor thread in the art of the United States (and of other countries as well). For my part, I do not see the sentimental as bounded in either art or literature by particular formal choices, and feel that the focus on them has constricted our ability to perceive the extent to which sentimental values and ambitions have pervaded cultural productions from the eighteenth century onward.

Only very recently have art historians begun to contribute to the reclamation of the sentimental, our efforts perhaps suppressed by the still–powerful hold of modernism's antisentimental rhetoric.31 I hope that the story I tell will serve as a corrective to the misleading views and questionable judgments we find in all too many histories of and monographs on American art, even today. But more than that, through this book I seek to redefine and revitalize a wide range of works of American art and the contexts for interpreting and appreciating them more deeply. American artists from Peale and Trumbull to Tanner and Sargent understood the power that resides in art’s ability to move the viewer to tears.