

# American Arts

QUARTERLY

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*Winter 2009*



Philippe de Montebello

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George Tooker

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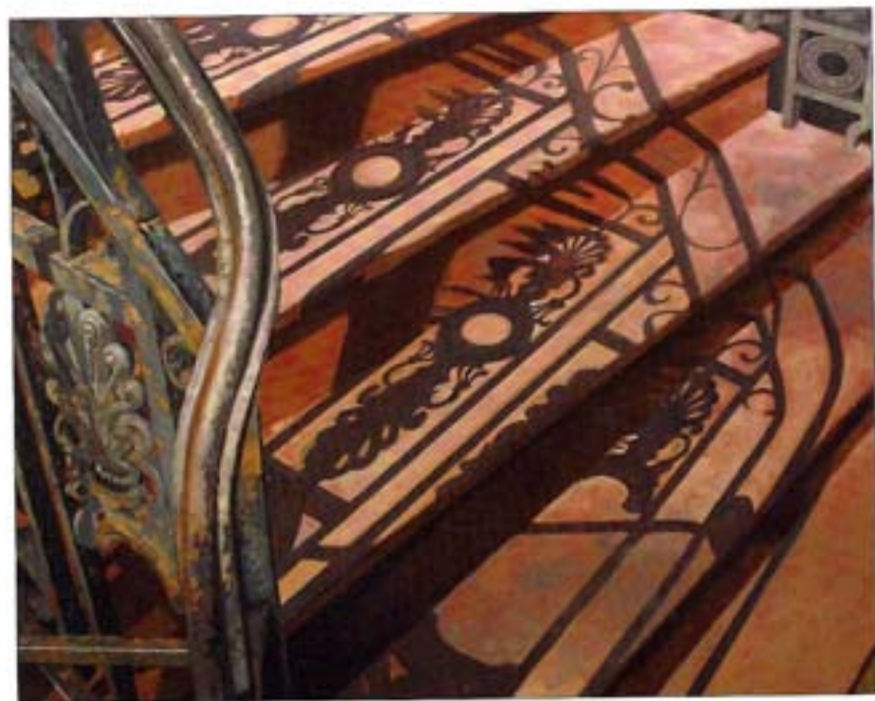
Epic Arts

country. J. Cacciola Gallery, 531 West 25th Street, New York, New York 10001. Telephone (212) 462-4646. On the web at [jcacciolagallery.com](http://jcacciolagallery.com)

### Andrew Jones

Andrew Jones, whose work was on view at George Billis Gallery in New York City in January, is an architectural naturalist. His paintings constitute a kind of field guide to the mostly nineteenth-century ornamental ironwork of urban stoops, which—while usually ignored by tourists focused on iconic structures—adds immeasurably to the aesthetic texture of neighborhoods. There is a preservationist aspect to this enterprise, as Jones documents these elegant survivors of the old city and responds to inevitable signs of corrosion with both melancholy and a painter's appreciation for ruined beauty. In *Bethune Street Shadows* (all works 2008), for example, rust dapples the greenish metal, and bits of the decorative components are missing. We see the whole pattern—palmettos, tendril curves and circles classically restrained by rectangular vertical elements—cleanly in the shadow pattern cast across the steps.

Jones could have chosen to document his subjects in stylized drawings, but this flâneur is a plein-air realist as interested in the effects of light as he is in the morphology of urban design. In *Bethune Street Shadows*, the railing is pushed to the side of the composition, the shadows dominate, and the artist focuses on



Andrew Jones, *Bethune Street Shadows*, 2008  
COURTESY GEORGE BILLIS GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

the mottled light on the dusty-peach and red steps. The paint-handling is looser in *West 12th Street Italianate Shadows*, where forms are blurred and details lost in the almost-impressionistic play of glinting sun and shadowy shapes. Jones relishes the tension between what he calls architecture's "vocabulary of patterns" and the "irregularities created by perspective and atmospheric and lighting conditions." In *West 15th Street Newels*, he plays the diagonal sweep of the ironwork against the shadows on the steps, which became sharper as they flow into direct sunlight.

Jones's focus on neighborhoods such as Greenwich Village inevitably prompts comparisons with Edward Hopper (1882–1967), albeit without Hopper's existential dramatis personae. But Hopper takes in the sweep of the street, while Jones zooms in on details. The further he pulls back, the less interesting his compositions become. Compare two tall, narrow format images (both 48-by-24 inches). *Bank Street Twilight* depicts a row of brick houses, in tightly angled perspective, their warm color contrasting with the deep blue of a sliver of sky. It's attractive but fairly conventional. *Barrow Street Newels*, on the other hand, seems more personal and more vivacious. The dark ornate newel post, caged by elaborate fretwork, casts soft shadows on the cream-colored steps. Blue highlights streak the whiplash banister, and pale yellow paint outlines ironwork edges, finding a sweet spot between three-dimensional illusion and two-dimensional picture plane.

The ironwork he admires represents a brilliant vernacular resolution of the competing design imperatives of the organic and the geometric. Jones's work is an homage to the artisan's craftsmanship and instinctive grace. As a painter, he faces his own challenges shuttling between representation and abstraction, between nineteenth-century and modernist idioms. *Far West 11th Street Railings* sets rectangles and squares—green ironwork, terracotta steps, black shadows—against each other in a tightly patterned 40-by-40-inch painting that suggests Constructivism. This close-up angled shot makes for a dynamic formal experience. In other images, he explores art nouveau curves. Looking down a row of stoops in *West 14th Street Afternoon Railings*, Jones uses the repeated arabesques to establish an overall surface pattern, dissolving the distant rank in painterly daubs of light. An outsized spiral wrought-iron flourish dominates the stoop in *Cobble Hill Sunset*, and his angled perspective persuasively locates the form as part of the streetscape. But in *East 7th Street Railings I*, a similar leafy whorl seems to float free of its surroundings. The big, flamboyant curves, in black edged with white light, are silhouetted against streaky sky-blue and aqua passages of painterly abstraction. The limits of representation are reached in *Bank Street Afternoon: Shadows III*, where the familiar elements have been reduced to broad, nuanced stripes of cream and terracotta, overlaid with spidery, distorted shadows. Out of context, the subject would be nearly indecipherable.

Jones's project begins with enlightened observation. He inspires us to pay