



On Creating a Usable Culture: Margaret Mead and the Emergence of American Cosmopolitanism

Maureen A. Molloy

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Margaret Mead's career took off in 1928 with the publication of "Coming of Age in Samoa". Within ten years, she was the best-known academic in the United States, a role she enjoyed all of her life. In "On Creating a Usable Culture", Maureen Molloy explores how Mead was influenced by, and influenced, the meanings of American culture and secured for herself a unique and enduring place in the American popular imagination. She considers this in relation to Mead's four popular ethnographies written between the wars ("Coming of Age in Samoa", "Growing Up in New Guinea", "The Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe", and "Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies") and the academic, middle-brow, and popular responses to them. Two themes subtend Molloy's analysis. The first is Mead's articulation of the individual's relation to his or her culture via the trope of sex. Each of her early ethnographies focuses on a "character" and his or her problems as expressed through sexuality. This thematic ties her work closely to the popularization of psychoanalysis at the time with its understanding of sex as the key to the self. The second theme involves the change in Mead's attitude toward and definition of "culture"-from the cultural determinism in "Coming of Age" to culture as the enemy of the individual in "Sex and Temperament". This trend parallels the consolidation and objectification of popular and professional notions about culture in the 1920s and 1930s.

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