



The Arts at Black Mountain College

Mary Emma Harris

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It was at Black Mountain that Merce Cunningham formed his dance company, that John Cage staged his first "happening," that Buckminster Fuller built his first dome, - and that Arthur Penn taught acting as a student. The roster of talent at this small experimental college reads like a who's who of American art. In this definitive account of the arts at Black Mountain, Mary Emma Harris documents a uniquely fertile educational experiment and reveals the apprenticeships of artists and writers who were to have a significant influence on American culture. Distilling the facts from the myths and memories that have shrouded the college, Harris has reconstructed the history of Black Mountain and traced its legacy by documenting the accomplishments and exploring the ideas about the arts of those who taught or attended. She exposes the popular notion of Black Mountain as a haphazardly conceived venture or an "anything goes" environment and replaces it with a carefully drawn portrait of a self-consciously directed effort that grew out of the progressive education movement. Although it lasted only twenty-four years, was beset by financial woes, and enrolled fewer than 1,200 students, Black Mountain College launched a remarkable number of artists who provided the wellspring for the avant-garde in America after 1960. Proceeding chronologically through the four major periods of the college's history, the book covers every aspect of its extraordinary curriculum in the visual, literary, and performing arts from the 1930s to the 1950s, when it closed, forgotten and dishonored. The book's appendix, listing people whose lives intersected at Black Mountain, makes clear why the college's influence has endured. Arguably, no other American collegiate faculty has brought together such diverse talents as Anni and Josef Albers, Lyonel Feininger, Franz Kline, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Beaumont Newhall, Walter Gropius, Eric Bentley, Paul Goodman, Robert Duncan, Charles Olsen, and Robert Creeley. Equally impressive are the students whose work they inspired, including Robert Rauschenberg, Kenneth Noland, Cy Twombly, John Chamberlain, Dorothea Rockburne, Stan Vanderbeek, Jose Yglesias, Francine du Plessix Gray, Jonathan Williams, and Galway Kinnell. Mary Emma Harris, an art historian, has devoted the past seventeen years to interviewing alumni/ae, researching archives, and locating the art works produced at the college as well as many previously unpublished photographs of college events.

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