



Celebrity Caricature in America

Wendy Wick Reaves

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Mae West, George Gershwin, the Marx Brothers, Babe Ruth - these were just a few of the celebrities caricatured in popular American periodicals during the first half of the 20th century. This book presents hundreds of these rediscovered drawings and introduces a type of portraiture based on modern design and a preoccupation with personality-based fame. Wendy Wick Reaves explores the roots of celebrity caricature in the pre-World War I culture of New York and charts its growth into a fad during the 1920s and 1930s. She tells how caricatures of the famous permeated the press - "Vanity Fair", the "New Yorker", the "New York World" and other periodicals - and appeared as well on silk dresses, theatre curtains and cigarette cases. She recounts the careers of many of the masters of the art, including Al Hirschfeld, Miguel Covarrubias, Al Frueh, Ralph Barton and Marius de Zayas, and shows how their stylized portraits of the famous reveal the roots of a celebrity culture in which, as gossip columnist Walter Winchell pointed out, social position was "more a matter of press than prestige". Reaves contends that this modern caricature - with its abbreviation, provocation, wit, figural distortion and dissonant colour contrasts - was a type of portraiture that captures the essence of the times and influenced other arts. Celebrity caricature had appeal to an audience hungry for emblems of the emerging urban culture. This book accompanies the first comprehensive exhibition on celebrity caricature, which will open at the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, USA in April 1998.

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