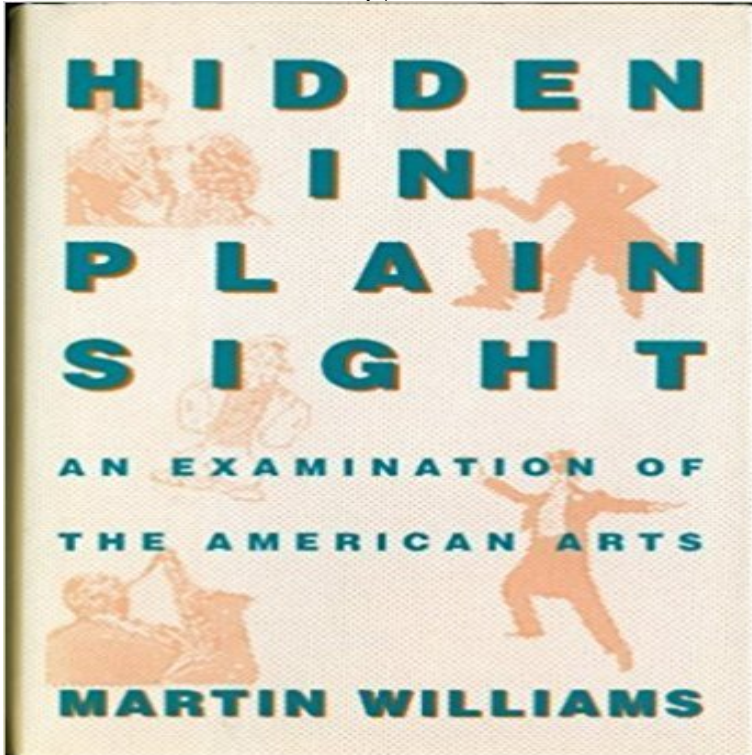


## Hidden in Plain Sight: An Examination of the American Arts



When Mikhail Baryshnikov defected to the United States in 1974, he announced that his hero as a dancer was Fred Astaire. Many Americans were surprised that a highly popular figure from the movies could inspire a classically trained European dancer, just as they would be surprised to hear Duke Ellington called a great composer in the same breath with Ravel. But these artists and others, writes Martin Williams, deserve such praise. Twentieth century America, he argues, has produced a rich and innovative culture whose best artists should be a source of national pride.

In *Hidden in Plain Sight*, acclaimed critic Martin Williams offers an eloquent celebration of the achievements of American culture. Americans, Williams writes, have labored under the sense that the art forms created on our shores are less valid than the traditional art forms of Europe. In these lucid essays, he shows how certain American artists have achieved a range and power of their own. Specifically, rejecting such terms as popular culture, Williams looks at such great, innovative artists as D.W. Griffith and Fred Astaire and shows how they virtually created their own genres of art with a uniquely American outlook and temperament. He offers a brilliant look at Duke Ellington, exploring the range and enormous volume of his work and describing how he worked with his orchestra in the same way great dramatists (Shakespeare among them) have worked with the specific talents of their actors. Williams looks at comic strips and finds in E.C. Segars original Popeye a perceptive and prophetic comic comment on dictatorship done in 1936. He sees Walt Kelly as a kind of American Father Goose. He discusses the aesthetics of TV by looking at Bullwinkle and Rocky. He provides freshly revealing accounts of the detective story, the gangster thriller, and the radio satire of Fred Allen, and more.

On the other hand, Williams seriously questions whether the United States has a folk music in the traditional sense. In 1924, Gilbert Seldes published *The Seven Lively Arts*, a landmark account of the originality and value of American culture. *Hidden in Plain Sight* will be considered a Seldes for the 1990s--and yet it goes further, offering a celebratory critique by the writer Gary Giddins of the *Village Voice* called one of the most distinguished critics (of anything) this country has produced.

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