



Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture

By Michael Kammen

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Mystic Chords of Memory

"Illustrated with hundreds of well-chosen anecdotes and minute observations . . . Kammen is a demon researcher who seems to have mined his nuggets from the entire corpus of American cultural history. . . . Insightful and sardonic."—*Washington Post Book World*

In this groundbreaking, panoramic work of American cultural history, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *A Machine That Would Go of Itself* examines a central paradox of our national identity. How did "the land of the future" acquire a past? And to what extent has our collective memory of that past—as embodied in our traditions—been distorted, or even manufactured? Ranging from John Adams to Ronald Reagan, from the origins of Independence Day celebrations to the controversies surrounding the Vietnam War Memorial, from the Daughters of the American Revolution to immigrant associations, and filled with incisive analyses of such phenomena as Americana and its collectors, "historic" villages and Disneyland, *Mystic Chords of Memory* is a brilliant, immensely readable, and enormously important book.

"Fascinating . . . a subtle and teeming narrative . . . masterly."—*Time*

"This is a big, ambitious book, and Kammen pulls it off admirably. . . . [He] brings a prodigious mind and much scholarly rigor to his task. . . . An important book—and a revealing look at how Americans look at themselves."—*Milwaukee Journal*

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Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture By Michael Kammen Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #381828 in Books
- Published on: 1993-02-02
- Released on: 1993-02-02
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.97" h x 2.16" w x 5.17" l, 1.75 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 880 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Kammen's massive study makes an important contribution to our understanding of how Americans define themselves and the parameters of freedom. Illustrations.

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From Library Journal

Within the last ten years, many American historians have discovered the importance of collective "memory" in shaping their nation. In some respects following the lead of influential historians from other nations, they now try to understand the forces that shaped the ways in which Americans remember and use their past and what significant events altered their consciousness of history. Long before recent scholars began decrying the dominance of obscure monographs and calling for greater convergence of ideas in historical studies, Kammen had demonstrated that synthesis could be accomplished without sacrificing richness of detail and divergent interpretations. Moreover, he showed that historians could communicate with one another and a wider audience at the same time. This book, part of Kammen's multivolume rethinking of American history, presents his view of the growing dependence on and debate over collective memory as a historical force during four periods since 1870. With great skill he distinguishes the ways Americans adapted their views of the past to fit the needs of their present circumstances. He weaves a command of formal cultural history with a thorough understanding of popular culture into an astonishingly wonderful book that enlightens not only the history of the past century and a quarter but also the present.

- *Charles K. Piehl, Mankato State Univ., Minn.*

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From Kirkus Reviews

An ambitious, wonderfully detailed investigation into the shifting perceptions of American cultural identity from Pulitzer Prize-winner (People of Paradox, 1973) Kammen (American History and Culture/Cornell; A Machine That Would Go of Itself, 1986, etc.). Taking his title from Lincoln's First Inaugural Address plea for national unity, Kammen asserts that, particularly in times of upheaval, "a usable past has been needed to give shape and substance to national identity." Thus, the broad chronological division of the book into three postwar periods: 1870-1915, when the trauma of civil war and an influx of immigrants made history a mechanism for social and political unification; 1915-45, during which time the tensions of memory and modernism, populism and elitism, combined to forge a uniquely American aesthetic; and 1945- 90, an era of "amnesia" encompassing an intense interest in things historical and a shocking lack of specific knowledge. Throughout, the author masterfully untangles the threads of myth, tradition, and nostalgia underlying the curious "ambiguities and dualisms" of a nation stubbornly devoted to both past and future vision. Hence, there arose such very American anomalies as Henry Ford following up his transformation of working life and leisure (and his oft-quoted remark that "History is more or less bunk") with obsessive collecting and the creation of two "living" museums. Splendidly inclusive in the best, most delightful vein of intellectual history, in which no cultural artifact is discounted as trivial, Kammen's study offers a liberal sampling of high and low culture--literature and popular reading material; pageants and parades; art, architectural, and design trends; museums, theme parks and monuments--as well as a nice dollop of historiography and a careful consideration of similar movements abroad. Admirable, perceptive, and refreshingly well balanced--a daunting task superbly accomplished. (One hundred and forty-five illustrations--not seen.) -- *Copyright ©1991, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

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