



The Last Dandy, Ralph Barton

Bruce Kellner

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Ralph Barton, one of the most successful artists of the 1920s, mirrored the frantic decade in which he lived. Too much easy money, four failed marriages (his wives included French composer Germaine Tailleferre, actress Carlotta Monterey, who later married Eugene O'Neill, and the future Mrs E.E. Cummings), and his own manic-depressive personality all contributed to Barton's descent into madness. Plagued by insomnia, headaches, and what he would come to call his annual "spring nervous breakdown", he began to draw images with an air of the grotesque. As the glitter of the 20s gave way to the tarnished years of the Depression, before he had turned 40, Ralph Barton killed himself. One of the advisory editors and original cartoonists of "The New Yorker", Ralph Barton commanded top dollar for his illustrations in "Vanity Fair", "Harper's Bazar" and "Photoplay" after beginning his career quite modestly in his native Kansas City, Missouri. At the height of his powers, he was perhaps the highest paid artist in New York City. No other illustrator was more widely imitated, and no other was so quickly forgotten when his dramatic life came to its early end. In this first full-length biography of the artist, Bruce Kellner restores Ralph Barton to his place in the history of American culture. Best known for his illustrations for "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes", Barton also captured New York's Belle Epoque, Paris under the shadow of the Great War, and the Broadway theatre of the 20s. Interwoven with myriad samples of Barton's cartoons is the fascinating story of his intimate friendships with Charlie Chaplin, H.L. Mencken and fellow Missourian Thomas Hart Benton. Bootleg liquor flowed at parties hosted by Alfred A. Knopf or Carl Van Vechten where Barton mingled with such celebrities as Sherwood Anderson, Ethel Barrymore, Paul Robeson, Theodore Dreiser, George Gershwin and Clarence Darrow. While the Charleston took the city by storm, the Harlem Renaissance found its roots, and speakeasies sprang up like weeds, this ardent philanderer illustrated and caricatured the foibles and fads of the period. Ralph Barton left no written memoirs. From his scattered correspondence and from the reminscences of his daughters and his friends, however, Bruce Kellner has reconstructed the career of this remarkable American artist. Illustrated with more than 100 samples of Barton's work, 20 of them in colour, "The Last Dandy" tells the unforgettable story of the artist's reckless life and tragic death among the literati in America's most decadent decade.

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