

Agnes de Mille's 1990 book *Portrait Gallery* is a reminiscence of "artists, impresarios, intimates" from her entire career. This concluding chapter on New York, however, describes her girlhood in Harlem, and assesses the sweep of history from her uniquely acute and refined perspective.

Our lovely streets in Harlem are now neglected and festering. Morningside Park is today one of the most dangerous spots in this city, and after dark no sane person would venture into it, or even pass close by. The neighboring houses are broken and filthy. On occasion there have been tales of rats attacking the children....

Street boys no longer play marbles or build innocent bonfires in the gutters; they mug old ladies and trade crack. All the police carry guns and use them.

The streets don't look the same, but this we expect. The fire horses are gone, together with the parlor maids, the white wings, and the ambulatory street vendors, who couldn't be heard even if they were here and still trying. Gone are all the newsboys, the trolley lines, the double-decker buses, the els (...torn down beginning in 1938, and the scrap iron was sold to Japan, which returned it to us in the bodies of our soldiers).

The church spire in any Manhattan neighborhood is barely visible, dwarfed and belittled as it is by business enterprises. These days one looks up to office buildings, and the towers of New York have nothing to do with intellectual or religious ideas. In fact, the entire island has become a remarkable conglomeration of stone monoliths, gravestones dedicated to greed.

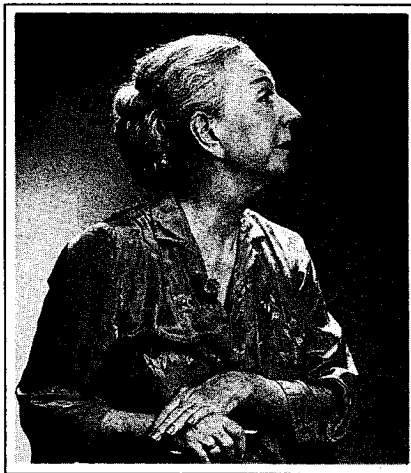
Nothing is so picturesque, as pleasant-sounding, as personal, or as friendly as it was. We know we must expect changes; architecture and customs change with time. Always have. Must do.

On the other hand:

....There are no laboring children on the streets, no delivery or mail boys. They are in school, learning it's hard to say what. People are older now, and healthier. The present generation has probably never seen a pockmarked face, for smallpox has been wiped out; tuberculosis, syphilis, meningitis, and infantile paralysis have diminished. Childhood disease is no longer rife nor fatal; the majority of children live. Although cancer, heart disease, and now AIDS seem virtually untouched, we have taken giant steps toward health. There are fewer one-armed or one-legged cripples. Most people, even elderly ones, have all their own teeth, something that was unheard-of in my youth. And there is no glint of gold when a person smiles. Only the indigent and the homeless smell. Most people can bathe. Even the poor have running water, generally hot. ....on the

## From *Portrait Gallery*

shelves of our supermarkets all the produce of the entire globe is displayed handily at the same time, year-round, despite the season. Most of the food is wrapped in plastic and is untouchable and sterile, and although the goodies seem devoid of attraction, there are no flies and no contamination. The fact of butchery is screened away as in an operating theater, and only the results are displayed,



composed and laid out in their transparent shrouds. One does not now have to wait to choose and supervise the cutting and wrapping. This saves sensibilities and time. It also saves lives. Everything we buy is sealed up, protected, prophylactic. It's dull and frequently a nuisance. But we stay alive.

We have reached the moon, have broken the atom and harnessed atomic power. We have preserved the sound of dead voices and the look of dead people and their actions. Space no longer exists, nor time lapse. There is really no such thing as foreign or far-flung people. We see and hear instantly. Yet we have not succeeded in settling the basic, immemorial problem: our daily bread.

There are as many beggars on the street, as many indigent, hopeless, and insane people, as when I was a child. The need and the terror are the same. None of that has changed one bit. The drugged criminals frequenting Morningside Park are desperate people. I do not think they care particularly about the adventure on the moon.

"The poor ye have always with you." Was Jesus Christ, our savior, a profound economist or a hopeless pessimist?

But one group is better off, and the history of this century is distinguished chiefly not by mechanical or scientific advancement in medical research and the attendant blessings but by the emergence of one half of the human race from bondage. Women

have come out of the closet - all women, poor as well as rich.

There are today only very few professions women cannot enter. They share in medicine, law, academics, government, building construction, weightlifting, policing, firefighting, garbage slinging. I do not know about cattle slaughtering. Women own their own wages. They have first claim to their children and an equal voice in divorce.

Domestic service has been greatly reduced. In fact it has all but disappeared, discommoding the housewife, certainly, but eliminating the slave class. Servants today make a decent wage - better than that, a good wage. Devices for saving the mistress's knees and back have been invented (and notice that they were not invented until it was the back and knees of the mistress that were involved), so ladies can still have sufficient leisure. But so can their servants. This is new.

As a symbol of the great evolution, women have discarded their corsets, for the first time in three hundred and fifty years. For the first time in two thousand years they are choosing their garments for reasons of practicality - all women, not just day laborers. They have gone into pants. Considerations of comfort have won out over sex, which is as drastic a choice... as though women had altered their skeletons - which as a matter of fact they have also done, finding slim hips more suitable to trousers than the wide pelvises of their grandmothers.

These astonishing changes have occurred in an unprecedentedly short period, historically speaking, and within my lifetime. Who made the revolution? Not wayward, militant, or flamboyant spirits, although they were present, calling attention to themselves and their triumphs. No, the revolution was made by those unknowns, with effort and patience, patience and endurance, with trying and with tears, by our aunts and our cousins, our nurses and teachers, our cooks, our mothers.

And by us, unceasingly, endlessly trying.