Art and its Observers

by

Patricia Emison
University of New Hampshire

Series in Art

Vernon Press

Patricia Emison's breadth of artistic knowledge is quite remarkable, yet she remains able to focus on the finest of details, always ensuring her readers remain engaged by writing in her typical dynamic style.

Most noteworthy for me in this publication is the closing chapter, which is worthy of an extended study in its own right. Emison's deep understanding of what has come before places her in the ideal position to explore the contemporary, and she does so directly and without hesitation, turning topics on their heads, stripping back an artist's practice to the very core, and thus offering the audience – and indeed artist – unique insight.

David Cass
Artist and author of 'Perimetri Perduti' (2016), 'Pelàda' (2017),
'Rising Horizon', (2019), 'As Coastline is to Ocean' (2019)

Patricia Emison's "Art and Its Observers" offers fascinating and, at times, wonderfully personal musings about the history of art. She theorizes about the sometimes stable and sometimes turbulent history of taste, specifically how art is used and loved. She is not interested in telling a chronological story of select canonical objects and artists. Emison's goal is to understand how and why cultural changes happen. Each chapter presents a succinct meditation on topics such as marks of artists' prominence and reputation, artistic worth, or the changing concept of art. The book is full of surprising intellectual and formal threads, such as her marvelous consideration of how the Greek 'kouros' (male statue) inspired not only Renaissance artists but the mass-produced cast statues of Union and Confederate Civil War soldiers that grace so many town squares. Later, the type appears in idealized Teutonic male sculptures favored by the Nazis.

Similarly, Emison traces the long histories of commemorative columns and equestrian monuments from ancient Rome to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. She appropriately warns that there is no stable art history, yet it is better to understand art's historical context than impose current tastes and preoccupations. In her sections on collecting and abandoning Old Master norms, Emison asks, "how do we judge quality today?" She gives several examples, such as the contemporary negative reactions to the nudity of Michelangelo's Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel or the "unfinished" paintings of Manet or Whistler. Such valuations often change dramatically over time or even after an artist's death. I heartily recommend Emison's book, which is smart, thought-provoking, and intended to challenge how we approach art and its long history.

Prof. Dr. Jeffrey C. Smith
Art History; Northern Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture
The University of Texas at Austin

Patricia Emison asks acute and searching questions about the perceived quality, reception and longevity of cultural monuments and artefacts in western art through swift but intensely knowledgeable dips into architecture, sculpture, painting, drawing, music and works of literature, drawing out enlightening connections with the past that are relevant to contemporary thinking. As she states, studying the history of western art is 'for the sake of not being trapped in the knowledge priorities and judgement patterns of the present [but] to think about the world more freely.' She makes acute comments about all sorts of matters from Renaissance patronage to modern-day money laundering; from the innovations of past techniques to concerns in contemporary film; from art as service rather than commodity to the changing status of portraits and military monuments 'where what once seemed a stable consensus can quickly vanish.' The book is spiced with witty comments: discussing the founding of European museums, she comments, 'The history of art became a history of high-status mutually enhancing objects, a kind of old-boy network of the inanimate.' Her non-theory-bound approach to the changing status of art can be summed up in her own words: 'How do we determine when an interpretation ... fails to raise bold questions and falls into complacency?' This bold response to the historical aspects of Western-dominated American art and culture sectors is as refreshing as it is needful.

Deanna Petherbridge
Professor Emeritus CBE
Associate Fellow, Warburg Institute, University of London

This fast-paced and deeply informed account ranges freely across the history of art, encouraging the reader to look afresh at ways in which works of art become "magnets of meaning" over time, and to find stimulating connections between them.

Elizabeth Cropper
Dean Emerita, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts,
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Weaving together carefully observed vignettes, Patricia Emison delivers a rich and thought-provoking fabric of Western art that, the more evocative for its poignant, poetic prose, pursues the Romantic quest for unity within multiplicity. The canonical survey of styles and great artists yields to a subtle evocation of powerful interrelationships across time that provokes the reader not merely to rethink the history of art but think through the ways in which art and its observers construct such histories from the chaos of creation. In the process, Emison argues powerfully for the vitality of the Old Master tradition that reverberates not only through her narrative but the story of modernism as well.

Cordula Grewe
Indiana University Bloomington

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Cover drawing by Chloë Feldman Emison, after Dürer's *The Fall of Man* engraving of 1504, on the theme of art and its observers, pen and ink and wash. Fig leaf dingbat by the same artist.

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To the Reader

Different kinds of readers will want to approach this text variously. Those who are new to the history of art should read through at a clip, looking for recurrent themes and key ideas that may be useful to them as they develop their art historical sensibility. The footnotes (which I have tried to keep to a minimum) may be skimmed for the sake of noting the range of sources; art history is by its very nature interdisciplinary. Readers will not find here exhaustive treatments of particular works, biographical introductions to famous artists, or an emphasis on terminology, and they will need to tolerate the mention of unfamiliar names and sometimes use museum websites to find images. Such novice readers should feel licensed by the reading to think about works of art wherever they may encounter them, examining them in their particularity, leaving until later the task of inserting them into selected richer context(s), whether historical, thematic, or pertaining to materials and technique, and then probing how such contexts might affect one's understanding of the work. This is not a text for instilling particular, retrievable sets of information, but instead for stimulating a wide-ranging cogitation, from the personal to the more theoretical.

Those who frequent museums and who take an interest in the history of architecture can read the essay to ascertain how what they already know might fit into a larger framework. They may discover further avenues of interest to explore, possibly more far-flung ones than they might have happened across otherwise.

Devoted students of the history of art might find here a useful summary or version of what they have assimilated previously. For them the text's premier virtue may be its relative conciseness, which may allow for making connections otherwise lost amidst a density of material. Perhaps after years of specializing, some vantage may be gained by stepping back and surveying from a distance. Similarly, those who customarily look at other artistic and cultural traditions may find this a convenient way to become familiar with various aspects of western art history.

Practicing artists will want to pay more attention to the recurring theme of how modernism grew out of the Old Master tradition, told here with an emphasis on the similarity of early twentieth-century art to the work of proceeding centuries and offering an argument that late twentieth and twenty-first-century art has made its own, more distinctive break with tradition, and not only with stylistic tradition.

All readers should bear in mind that the text is meant to utilize scholarly study as a basis from which to grapple with forming one's personal apprehension of the history of art rather than as an end in itself. For this reason, at times the author's own taste and biases will be evident. By no means is the reader obliged to second those views. On the contrary, humanistic study entails analyzing differing perspectives, all in the service of constructing a larger and more differentiated, though ideally a continuous, shared reality.

Without beauty, the human sensibility becomes discouraged. One could look at a flower, of course, or a child; but to look at a painting is to feel looked at, comprehended, yourself.[1]

[1] Rachel Cusk, *The Last Supper, A Summer in Italy*, New York, 2009, 198.

With thanks to the many people who helped me in various ways as I was travelling, especially when I was in a foreign country and in particular those who looked at art with me. With special thanks to Jennifer Rignold, granter of the kindest hospitality and honest reader, and remembering my grandmother, Ruth Miller Emison (1889-1975), for whom travel was rare, precious, and important to share.

Preface
by Peter Parshall

Among the various disciplines in the humanities, the field of art history is particular for its tendency to seek out patterns of association, primarily formal continuities over long periods of time and wide expanses of space. Not that such a viewpoint is peculiar to the discipline, but it is more fundamental, even elemental, to our practice. To walk through a city as an art historian is to seek out morphological affinities and resonances of meaning among things. For the most part, this means human-made things, but not entirely; as the Renaissance once taught us, all art begins in nature. One could say that, to some extent, everyone has this experience of the city as something both present and past, familiar and remote; but to see these things from the perspective of a historian and a teacher adds a particular slant. The book that follows—more an extended essay than a monographic study—is a demonstration of this discursive way of understanding the world.

The story Patricia Emison tells, like her manner of telling it, is both pedagogical and peripatetic, and requires close attention. It is said that Aristotle liked to walk with his students while he lectured, hence his identification as a 'peripatetic' philosopher. Whether this is true or not we will never know but, like the 'blind' Homer, it characterizes a certain mode of delivery that might convey something genuine about the way Aristotle taught. Movement, for one, redescribes the order of priority that attends any configuration of teacher and student. If an audience is assembled before a podium or seated around a seminar table, the setting necessarily retreats in deference to the conversation, but the center of attention always remains clear. When instructed by a guide moving through space, it is the attractions of the setting that take prominence. Emison's account has about it the quality of a peripatetic reflection, a sense of the movement of a mind at work. Part reminiscence, part speculation, often opinionated, always personal, we are instructed without quite seeming to be so. For some time now, formal education has been pushing hard against the lecture as a suitable method of instruction, and this bias is also being extended to academic writing. We are fast forgetting what it means to learn something through application and—given the availability of digital resources—what it means to remember what we learn.

In the broader scheme of things, Emison's perspective on the history of western culture is orthodox. She considers the Renaissance to be the crucial turning point in the ways we consider the past and understand its bearing on the future. She finds the taproot of European cultural history in Greek and

Roman antiquity, extending more or less from Pericles's Athens to the advent of modernity. She traces this thread initially through a sequence of public monuments sponsored mainly by secular and religious institutions, including the state. These monuments adhere to a select vocabulary of formats (the column, the equestrian figure, the fountain, etc.) and are intended to convey individual or communal value through historical commemoration or inspiring allegory. Secondly, and of equal importance, is the production of art for the individual, especially for the collector. This is an indication of a new kind of respect for artistic objects and their possible benefit to the quality of our lives. It is an intention of artistic patronage greatly advanced by the Renaissance, not incidentally the period that also witnessed the dawn of commercial capitalism and the scientific revolution, factors of less immediate concern to the author. Emison's attention is given largely to the evolution of high and official culture rather than to vernacular production, marginal communities, or colonial hybridization, although her version of that authorized culture is full of twists and turns, ironies of history, and frequent irreverence. She makes her intention perfectly clear:

> The present effort is meant neither to wrap the past in mystique nor to put it on a pedestal as signifying universal value, but to demonstrate some interconnections, much discontinuity, and an inviting vastness. The history of western art, let alone all of art, has provided us with a plentitude of marvelous objects, curiosity about which might occupy a lifetime. The objective here is to attempt to make a modicum of sense from a whole which we know really isn't a whole in any organic sense, but which nevertheless is, at times, highly referential. Let us say that artists, persistently, have been those recognized…to have achieved in their work an eloquent or otherwise effective rendering…of thought (ideas or feelings) that is difficult to convey and that has special value (p. 9).

The arguments—explicit and implicit—made in this text urge us to consider the richness of continuity and change, and how the reception and reinterpretation of art have played a role in that. Hers is not a new endeavor, but at this moment it has a far more pressing importance as we rush to revise the received understandings of our heritage in order to address gross prejudicial imbalances and negligent exclusions. The urge for renewal is salient in western culture, for example, our recurrent investment in the idea that the arts not only change but actually progress over time. What we currently risk in this effort to dramatically re-evaluate our history is the loss of a continuity that, whatever its deep inadequacies, might nevertheless help to create an integrated and more balanced history with a hedge against falling into confusion and incoherence. Whereas making sense of history was initially the responsibility of poets and theologians, in modern times this responsibility has been transferred to the

academy. This is where the so-called culture wars will gradually be worked out, although doubtless not where they will finally be decided. It is no news to anyone choosing to open this book that the study of the humanities is now faced with a serious crisis, not least a depreciation of resources and student interest. The author, like many humanists on university faculties, is acutely concerned about the plight of those disciplines devoted to the history of the imagination. Political priorities (and therefore funding preferences) are increasingly gravitating to science and technology, a shift that is partly dictated by the perceived and often corrupt needs of late capitalism, and more constructively by a dim but increasing recognition that we are confronting an unprecedented challenge to the survival of the species, and we need to do something about it. The stakes are extraordinarily high.

What can the study of the classical tradition possibly contribute to alleviating this threat? Collective wisdom holds that the liberal arts—or the expression of the creative imagination as I am calling it—is not just a desirable ally in the pursuit of the sciences, but an essential aspect of their ability to flourish. The concept of the liberal arts was an invention of the Middle Ages when the first universities in western Europe were founded. Its modern understanding, however, came about largely in the Renaissance. It was then that the notion of a work of art as a source of spiritual enrichment was first formulated and analyzed, and it was then that the artist was granted the liberty to explore the potentials of the imagination beyond the promotion of ideologies and the status of the wealthy. Invention for its own sake began to acquire a value.

Like the concept of originality itself, the Renaissance realignment of what it meant to be an artist and what latitudes should be provided to exercise that calling was a radical and liberating idea. “It is one of the achievements of western civilization that it has gotten to the point that a work of art need not flatter us nor our time” (p. 91). How this happened and what it has meant became legitimate subjects for academic inquiry as well, and now this line of investigation is also being questioned. We are growing afraid of what revisionist thought and criticism from within might do. Rational thinking, and therefore truth itself, are held in contempt in many corners of our society. As Emison sees it, the shift away from teaching the liberal arts reflects a depreciation of their importance. It would seem foolish to contest this assumption, and yet it is an illusion to suppose that the study of the arts has ever occupied very wide attention. Readers have always been few and visitors to art galleries limited to a minority despite the mighty efforts of publishers and museum directors to make it otherwise. After all, why should people be expected to think that they need help choosing how to entertain themselves, what to read, and what they should find suitable to put on the wall? Courses in Baroque art, folk music, and Greek drama are not for everyone, and we are now in a period of recalibration.

It would be good if that reconsideration could be conducted with more forethought and deliberation, but revision is nonetheless needed and will certainly happen. Let us hope that the outcome can avoid cultural anarchy, or more likely a newly configured hierarchy left to be coopted by short-term political and commercial interests.

Should an apparent decline in enrollment in the humanistic disciplines be taken as a sign of depleted sensibility within the culture at large? This seems to me a mistaken assumption. Simply because something is not being formally studied does not mean that we are slipping into the monochrome world of *Metropolis* (1927), despite the undeniable evidence that we are now at a historical moment that has far too much in common with Fritz Lang's iconic film. On the contrary, it is not unreasonable to conclude that we are in a generative phase of creative energy, perhaps unprecedented in its diversity and cultural dynamism. Due to the vast opportunities to communicate through digital and other means, this energy is also relatively unbounded by class discriminations, racial barriers, cultural hierarchies, or even economic advantage. For better and worse, much of what is going on is self-promoted, and far too much of it polluted with deliberate misinformation. How the astonishing variety and intense pace of experimentation that seem manifest in modern-day culture will be judged in the long-term is impossible to say, but it would appear misguided to conclude that we have, in this regard at least, entered a new Dark Age. Indeed, if anything, the free exercise of the imagination is the one light to be seen in an otherwise dismal firmament.

Emison's essay on art and its recipients is a deeply felt and ambitious work of analytical criticism and an important reminder of what we may lose by neglecting the past. Although she is above all an intellectual historian who sees the movement of culture driven principally by the minds of its makers, she is also alert to the impingement of politics, social change, and economics. Hers is the perspective of a longtime student of a history absorbed and assimilated on many levels. She is fluent in its languages, conscious of its nuances, and sensitive to the beauties and anomalies that mark its unfolding through time. Characteristic of her writings in general, these reflections are intelligent, erudite, and marked by personal commitment. One should approach this text as if it were a conversation: a stroll through the marketplace in the company of a worthy and congenial companion with a good story to tell and the conviction to tell it as she sees it.

Peter Parshall
Curator of Old Master Prints (retired), National Gallery of Art
November, 2021

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Further Reading

N.B. Although I have used the term Old Masters, I mean by that to signify work that includes both the High Renaissance and the Academic tradition that followed, and I use it to include women and others socially and/or economically disadvantaged. I have used B.C. and A.D. simply because it is more concise and, for me, familiar.

For a selection of high-resolution images, in addition to museum websites, see https://artsandculture.google.com.

The follow are basic or particularly engaging (sometimes quaint) readings, some of them old standards that might be worth looking at again, rather than a guide to current art historical research. They are arranged, roughly, in the chronological order of their subject matter and the edition given is the first.

Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind: The Greek Origins of European Thought*, New York: Harper, 1960 (*Die Entdeckung des Geistes: Studien zur Entstehung des europäischen Denkens bei den Greichen*, Hamburg: Claassen & Goverts,1946.

Roald Dahl, "He ploughed up $1,000,000," *Saturday Evening Post*, 20 Sept. 1947, later re-published in *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar, and Six More,* New York: Knopf, 1977 (on the discovery of the *Mildenhall Treasure*).

Henry Adams, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904.

Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages, A Study of the Life, Thought and Art in France and the Netherlands in the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, tr. F. J. Hopman, Garden City: Doubleday, 1924 (Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen: studie over levens- en gedachtenvormen der veertiende en vijftiende eeuw in Frankrijk en de Nederlanden, Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink, 1919).

John Ruskin, *Mornings in Florence, Being Simple Studies of English Art for Christian Travellers*, Orpington: G. Allen, 1875-77.

Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, written 1435 (*De pictura praestantissime*, Basel: Westheimer, 1540).

Aldous Huxley, "The Best Picture" (1925), *Collected Essays*, vol. 1, eds. R. Baker and J. Sexton, Chicago: I.R. Dee, 209-15.

Leonardo da Vinci, *The Literary Works*, ed. J.P. Richter, 2 vols, London: Searle and Rivington, 1883.

Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, London: Macmillan, 1873.

Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, tr. M. Hottinger, New York: Dover, 1929 (*Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwickelung in der neueren Kunst,* Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1915).

Baldassare Castiglione, *The Courtier of Counte Baldessar Castilio*, tr. Thomas Hoby, London: John Wolfe, 1588 (*Il libro del cortegiano*, Venice: Aldus, 1528).

Giorgio Vasari, *Painting illustrated in three dialogues…together with the Lives of the most eminent Painters from Cimabue to the Time of Raphael and Michelamgelo,* tr. W. Aglionby, London: John Gain,1685 (*Le vite dei più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori da Cimabue insino ai tempi nostri*, Florence: Torrentino, 1550).

Benvenuto Cellini, *The Life,* tr. T. Nugent, London: T. Davies, 1771 (*Vita*, Naples: P. Martello, 1728; written 1558-c. 1563).

Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500-1900*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

Eugène Fromentin, *The Old Masters of Belgium and Holland* (sometimes titled *The Masters of Past Time, Dutch and Flemish Painting from Van Eyck to Rembrandt*), tr. M. Robbins, New York: Schocken Books, 1882 (*Les maîtres d'autrefois*, Paris: E. Plon, 1876).

Eugène Delacroix, *The Journal*, tr. and ed. Walter Pach, New York: Covici, 1937 (*Journal de Eugène Delacroix*, Paris: E. Plon, 1893).

Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays*, tr. J. Mayne, London: Phaidon, 1964 (published in installments in *Le Figaro*, 1863).

Jean Renoir, *Renoir, my father* [Pierre-Auguste], Boston: Little, Brown, 1962.

William Morris, "The Ideal Book," lecture to the Bibliographical Society of London in 1893. See *The Ideal Book: Essays and Lectures on the Arts of the Book*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

Clive Bell, *Art*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1914.

Le Corbusier, *Towards an Architecture*, tr. F. Etchells, New York: Dover, 1931 (*Vers une architecture*, Paris: G. Crès, 1923).

John Betjeman, *Ghastly Good Taste: or, A depressing story of the rise and fall of English architecture*, London: Chapman & Hall, 1933.

Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius,* London: Faber & Faber, 1936 (sometimes titled, *Pioneers of Modern Design*).

Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of this Century: The Informal Memoirs of Peggy Guggenheim*, New York: Dial Press, 1946; *Confessions of an Art Addict*, New York: Macmillan, 1960; unified in 1979.

Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, Cambridge: MIT Press,1972.

De Waal, Edmund, *The White Road, Journey into an Obsession*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2015.

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My thanks to those who have helped this small book on its way, including institutions and individuals who have shared their photographs freely. My apologies for any errors.

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