

FINANCIAL TIMES

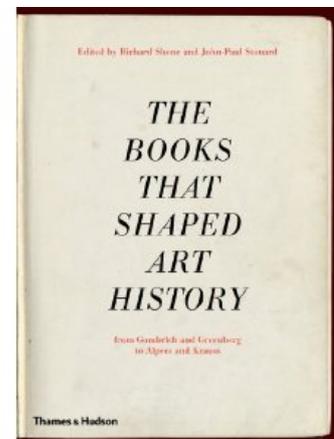
‘The Books that Shaped Art History’

The Books that Shaped Art History: From Gombrich and Greenberg to Alpers and Krauss, edited by Richard Shone and John-Paul Stonard, Thames & Hudson, RRP£24.95, 268 pages

By Jackie Wullschlager
March 1, 2013

Art history is more nervous and self-doubting than any other humanities discipline. The reason is obvious. Literary, political and social historians all use words to analyse other words – texts, documents, archives. But art historians grapple in the rational tool of language with material far less ordered. It will always be an uneasy mix.

Art history is also young. It lacks foundational texts like Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* or Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Until the 20th century, writers on art offered partisan, if sometimes brilliant, commentaries on their own or recent times – Vasari on the Italian Renaissance, Ruskin on Turner. *The Books that Shaped Art History*, a path-breaking volume emerging from a series in *The Burlington Magazine*, explores through a focus on 16 works how the discipline evolved after 1900.



Battle lines form immediately. Emile Mâle’s *L’art religieux du XIIIe siècle en France* and Bernard Berenson’s *The Drawings of the Florentine Painters*, both written at the turn of the century, demonstrate opposing sensibilities. Mâle, seeking textual and liturgical sources to unlock the narrative and spiritual meaning of Gothic architecture, essentially dealt with the history of thought. Berenson’s catalogue raisonné was by contrast a seminal, exquisitely refined piece of connoisseurship that “privileged the intelligent eye over the intelligible document”, asserting the power of close looking and scholarly intuition.

As art history matured, the extremism of each approach was necessarily modified. Erwin Panofsky’s monumental *Early Netherlandish Painting* (1953), exploring the integration of Christian symbolism and painterly realism, remains a touchstone of cultural-historical studies. Similarly, Kenneth Clark in *The Nude* (1956) added a deep intellectualism, and a lucid style, to the connoisseurship he acquired as Berenson’s pupil.

These qualities make Clark, I believe, the most rewarding art historian – a fantastically unfashionable view. John-Paul Stonard follows current thinking by boxing him into the end of a Victorian tradition, with *The Nude* to “be read simply for the pleasure of its sentences – however much of their innocence they may since have lost”. Stonard acknowledges the paradox, though, that despite Clark’s disavowal of contemporary art, he is acutely of his time: “the struggle to define a heroic figurative art was central to the cultural politics of the 20th century”. Clark not only revitalised understanding of antiquity but countered Socialist Realism’s “extreme political appropriation of the heroic classical body”.



In the 1950s and 1960s, the aesthete gives way to the theoretician: excellent chapters on two writers who managed to be both – EH Gombrich and Clement Greenberg – sit at the heart of this account. Gombrich was an unrivalled populariser, accessible without ever losing sharpness of judgment, for a period that saw an explosion of interest in art. Greenberg was a formalist and elitist who explained the evolution of modern art in solid philosophical terms.

In his heyday, the artist Barnett Newman noted, Greenberg's authority was "papal". His influence persists: of the two youngest writers (both in their seventies) covered here, structuralist Rosalind Krauss was his student, and Marxist TJ Clark formulated his socio-political thinking in reaction to Greenberg's modernism.

To its huge disadvantage, art history today is overwhelmed by philosophy: the leading undergraduate textbook, *Art Since 1900* (2004, 2012), co-edited by Krauss, contains more references to writers and critics than to artists.

Would Greenberg see this as a victory? "Let nothing come between you and art, nothing, no ideas, nothing," he once said. And "when it comes to explaining aesthetic verdicts, far better minds than mine haven't gotten anywhere near it. When something really works, you're helpless." This book is a heroic account of how writing battles not to be reduced to helplessness by great art.