

Art: A Crash Course, Crash Course Series

Julian Freeman

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These two titles are both quippish guides through the labyrinths of serious art - topics that can be pretty overwhelming if you weren't paying one bit of attention during Humanities 101. Both books, as the series title "Crash Course" suggests, were written for the novice. Indeed, the jacket blurbs assure readers that there are people who know even less than they do ("Does pointillism sound like a nasty skin rash to you?") and that the authors themselves don't take this opera and art stuff all that seriously. ("Have you an uneasy suspicion that 'La Donna e Moblie' does not really mean the girl's got a cellphone?"). The hip language and visual appearance of both books indicate the intended audience is the young, educated person seeking to impress a girlfriend, new boss or win some obscure trivia game.

Both Pettitt and Freeman utilize unintimidating language that reassures the reader and connects with contemporary life; language that suggests these were people just like us. Both books are also full of fascinating tidbits and sound research.

At first glance both books are very attractive: they are colorful and their small size (5" x 7") is endearing. As readers flip through the pages, they'll find accurate information, pretty script fonts, cartoons, side bars and color illustrations. All of this is very alluring until you try to read the book. Then it's just too much information (text and pictures) on too small a page using too small a font size. These books are comparable to youth-oriented commercials - lots of images going by real fast with no time for serious digestion. This is not back-porch-reading-marathon material. These are books you read when you have one or two minutes to spare - say when visiting the only really quiet place in the house. Or maybe you just take them with you to the museum and opera house and read them there.

SHELLIE WILLIAMS (July / August 1998)

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