ForeWord Reviews

Modern Art 1851-1929
Richard R. Brettell
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Regarding modern art, studies have traditionally unearthed several taproots commonly thought to have fed into an entire era of artistry—citing political, economic and social change, among others. Modern Art 1851-1929 finds a more human root where crossing the tresholds of art museums is as vital to modern art as crossing those of time without pause, as modernity itself demands. Brettell, award winning author of several art studies and independent international museum consultant, pens Modern Art with an alluring, cool authority—his words masking an obvious affectionate undercurrent for each brushstroke they trace, drawing the reader onward with few stalls.

The book begins with the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London and closes with the opening of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1929. Bracketed between these uniquely symbolic boundaries for an era, hangs the shifting face of modern art, ranging from Realism to Surrealism, from the vastness of Impressionism to the comparatively small Orphism movement. The book does not neglect to address the popular views of modern art genesis, yet finds its forte in exploring the modern innovations of the time which granted a fluid exchange of images between artisans and the public. With an unprecedented freedom enjoyed via lithography, photography and flourishing museums came the new accessibility of art. Much of the book, in turn, is devoted to study of iconology of the modernist movement which umbrellas sexuality, abstraction, class consciousness and anti-iconography, or art lacking subject.

Lushly illustrated and laced with insightful captions, the images showcase a large cross-section of masters, including many works from the former Eastern bloc never before seen. With its images tightly bound to the significance of the text, the book is rounded out with a comprehensive timeline, as in previous Oxford titles, which progressively matches completed works with general historical events.

This addition of cultural milestones lends another facet to an already far-reaching effort with wide appeal. This addition to the Oxford series brings a freshly chivalrous account of modern art, which successfully circumvents the mired tragedy of academic overkill to reach the cultural importance of exhibition. In this arena, modern art finds, beneath the caress of passing glances, the nourishment of humanity.

Karen Wyckoff