

The Art of Reading: An Illustrated History of Books in Paint

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As props go, a vase of flowers or bowl of fruit may qualify as the painter's favorite subject—excepting, of course, a portrait of the person paying the artist's fee in advance. But artists throughout history have also shown a fondness for the printed word. In fact, the great masters seemed especially intrigued by the use of books. Why? Was it to make evocative suggestions about the human subjects of their works? Or were they simply implying that books are beautiful, important cultural objects, as well as a flattering reflection back on the painter? In any case, the visual and literary arts had a thing for each other, and five hundred years of that relationship are the winsome topic of *The Art of Reading: An Illustrated History of Books in Paint*.

Certain paintings reveal men's attitudes toward women, if we trust the moralizing critics of Augustus Leopold Egg's *Past and Present, No. 1* (1858)—depicting an adulterous wife collapsed on the floor at news of her affair reaching her husband, along with the scandalous name "Balzac" on the cover of a book within her reach. George Washington Lambert's *The Sonnet* moves in a different direction, featuring a voluptuous nude woman as the imaginary creation of the sonnet being read by a stern man.

In all, more than one hundred and fifty paintings are included, accompanied by all manner of cultural commentary and historical context from Jamie Camplin and Maria Ranauro.

MATT SUTHERLAND (November/December 2018)

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