

Understanding Paintings: Themes in Art Explored and Explained

Alexander Sturgis

Hollis Clayson

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Like its sister arts of sculpture and dance, painting lives in an intensely physical, eternally present, but silent universe, visually inviting, but slightly alien to self-description. Its own internal language is made of images, and like hieroglyphics, the grammar—the logic that holds images together in the same frame—is highly evolved. Some of the languages, such as the shared classical and mythic allegorical references, are almost dead, recognized by a rarified few. Art comes from earlier art, and *Understanding Paintings* freely translates the evolution of subject and technique by a clever peg of discussing the works by various genres or subjects. At last, a history of art that is not hidebound by the tradition of chronology or the static grouping of “schools” of painting.

Drawing on the most renown examples of eight hundred years worth of Western art, from medieval altarpieces to abstract expressionism, Sturgis and Clayson, noted specialist art historians affiliated with London’s National Gallery and Northwestern University, respectively, offer a clear, concise commentary on the allotted areas: the nude, mythical allegories, historical realism, portraiture, still life, landscape and abstract painting. In much the same way as artists cross centuries with impunity, so the authors have made fresh curatorial groupings. Thus, for example, Velázquez’s 1650 *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* in a discussion of reading facial expressions as a sitter’s character, is linked to Francis Bacon’s borrowing for his disturbing, distorted 1951 *Pope I*. For those who might have reader fatigue for such well-known works, the texts seldom disappoint in inventing ways of re-seeing the images. Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* maintains that suggestive paradox of near movement in her smile by “losing the corners of her mouth and eyes.”

The authors cover a lot of ground, from the sublime sacred space of the Sistine Chapel to Mark Rothko’s nondenominational triptychs in a Houston installation, from Bosch’s hellish *The Garden of Earthly Delights* to British Damien Hirst’s cow carcass pickled in formaldehyde, but the viewing in this handsome book never seems forced or hurried. Rather, like a good museum guide, they make the works themselves seem immediate, patiently waiting for a new set of eyes to translate their silence into comprehension.

LEETA TAYLOR (September / October 2000)

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