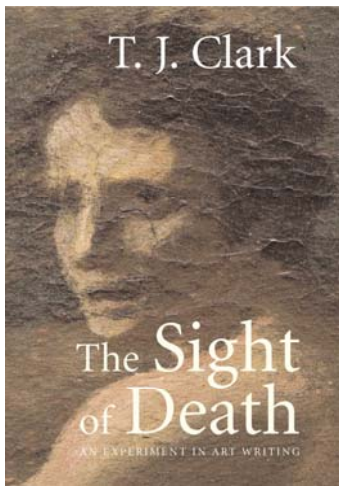


The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing / T.J. Clark.--New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, September 2006--260 p.: ill.--ISBN 0-300-11726-4 (cl., alk. paper): \$30.00



Readers of non-fiction expect linear, inexorable movement toward conclusions, and to enjoy the satisfaction of closure and “knowledge.” Too naturally, then, if we pause to look at paintings, we gird ourselves for “looking generated out of writing.” T.J. Clark, the well-known Berkeley professor, and provocative historian of the economic and political uses of European art, spent part of a six-month fellowship at the Getty Research Institute looking at two pictures by Nicolas Poussin: *Landscape with a Calm* and *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*. Clark’s “experiment” in the first half of 2000 was to record his daily observations, “just looking”--considering “what cannot be retained in the memory,” and “commemorating” his reactions in the form of a diary.

To dismiss these *primi pensari* as indulgent would mean missing the freshness and boldness of the experiment. Michael Baxandall observes that “We do not explain pictures: we explain remarks about pictures,” but Clark declares that “I want to write a reaction to my two paintings, not a theory of them.” His “involuntary” reactions, in almost novelistic real-time, include dollops of wit, poetry, and personal association that enhance the casual ephemerality of his notes. This deliberately tentative approach yields “a better set of questions to ask,” Clark writes, for when he “moves into the world of texts,” “because I have submitted to the pictures.” Of a hundred fine illustrations, all but a handful are generous details from the two canvases. Clark grapples with color, lighting, composition, condition, and most of all, the business of figures, sometimes in uncanny parallel with the intrusions of contingencies in the galleries, yet he never stoops to mere “optical tourism.”

Against Poussin’s formal clarity, or *netteté*, Clark discovers the anti-linguistic “unreadability” of some pictures—though he insists that “everything is paraphrasable.” He locks onto the relation between “the material and the idea” in the specificity of paint on canvas. He delivers “no last minute revelations,” yet offers several fine leads and ideas that will earn the book a place on any shelf devoted to Poussin.

Clark’s insistence that his offering is “entirely provisional . . . to be modified by further work” suggests a subtle epistemological, and even political angle. In a televised world where the real indulgence and deceptions are diminished “boundaries between seeing and speaking”, careful looking, and Montaigne’s “*Que sais-je?*” could be revolutionary antidotes. At every level, even the darkest “sight of death” in Poussin, Clark suffuses his plea for paying attention with humility and optimism.

John Hagood, Reference Librarian, National Gallery of Art, j-hagood@nga.gov

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