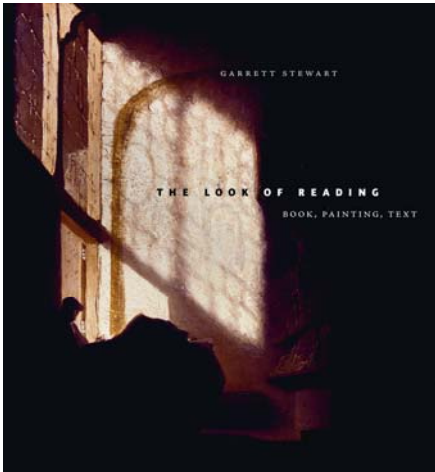


**The Look of Reading: Book, Painting, Text** / Garrett Stewart--Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press; December 2006.--432 p.: ill.--ISBN 0-226-77394-9 (cl., alk. paper): \$65.00.



Who among us doesn't relish the euphoria that can come, when one is immersed in a book? Who isn't charmed by the sight of someone else, across the room, reading silently? What title, then, would appeal more irresistibly to browsers in a bookshop, or, no less, to librarians, than a well-illustrated volume on the depiction of figures in the act of reading in Western art?

Garrett Stewart has identified what he calls a subgenre of painting, which he traces in an arc from medieval manuscripts through romantic and realist figural painting to an end in American conceptual art, and discovers a paradox that arises in the painted narrative drama of the "privileged inwardness" of reading. Right away he spots instances of Michael Fried's "absorption," but

Stewart extends his wonderful subject into an intriguing problem by asking, "What does painting see in reading?" A professor of English, Stewart sails with breathtaking range into the discipline of art history, and launches an armada of worthy ideas and solutions--often with enlivening neologisms such as "reverse ekphrasis"--while cobbling a survey of art, and a synthesis of critical theorists' work. In this approach, ambitiously both synchronic and diachronic, emerge anew the limitations and consequences of each critical tack. The juxtaposition of so many analyses and images across artistic periods broadly expands the range of possibilities for questions and solutions. The trope of men and women pictured reading inside Albertian windows, by Metsys and Bellini leads over the centuries (almost too teleologically) to "lexigraphs" by Ed Rusha, Richard Tuttle and Mark Tansey; the best and most sustained chapter takes on the career of Picasso, with its many images of readers over so much of the twentieth century. Against the painters come the ideas of Richard Wollheim, Norman Bryson, Jonathan Crary, William Mitchell, and T.J. Clark among many others, along with invocations of passages by literary artists like Virginia Woolf and Rilke.

In spite of the reverence *The Look of Reading* shows to text and image, reading it turns out to be mostly arduous and slow going. It is ironically unlikely to generate the extended reverie that artists have set down on "the plane of inscription." Stewart's work will have to be reckoned with, however--most likely in the same spirit of conjunction that it puts to use; perhaps with a investigation of the "cultural stylistics" of related images of people composing letters, or drawing, or listening to music. Surely too, contemporary artists books have much to say on this particular history of forms.

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