
Julian Bell--painter, author, art critic and writer for the New York Review of Books--begins his third book by expressing his intention to write the story of art through the ages. To that end, the reader should expect Mirror of the World to present a rich narrative rather than a traditional survey and analysis of art history. Bell doesn't focus on the aesthetics of art but instead places the works within their historical context. This text is not a comprehensive overview of global art history but is instead a selective introduction.

One of the strengths of Mirror of the World is the global picture it imparts by describing what has happened artistically across cultures, continents and time. Bell begins with the familiar Caves of Lascaux and finishes in the present with contemporary artist Lee-Ufan. As Bell guides his audience on this journey around the world, he jumps geographically, from China in one paragraph to France in the next. In this way works of art from many cultures are discussed chronologically rather than separated into geographically themed chapters.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact audience for whom this text is most useful. Clearly the author seeks to present an alternative approach to the traditional methods of teaching and studying art history, hence the subtitle: A New History of Art. However, the book is not necessarily intended for research purposes. Despite the conversational tone of the writing, the author articulates his observations and ideas with a passion for his subject. Bell invites the reader into a dialog, allowing room to insert their own perceptions and interpretations. This makes Mirror of the World an interesting read for art enthusiasts, and perhaps an excellent companion text in undergraduate art history courses.

The book is a visual treat, containing numerous high quality color images. It also contains a detailed and informative global timeline for readers to understand and compare movements. In addition, Bell includes an annotated bibliography by chapter as well as an extensive index. Lastly, the volume used for this review is a paperback. The binding won't last long under heavy use given the number of pages, the weight of the paper and the need to frequently refer to pages out of sequence.

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