
Britain’s golden age of art spanned the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but the founding of the Royal Academy of Arts in 1768 was the culmination of artistic achievement unparalleled in British life. Featuring the work of noted luminaries William Hogarth, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Francis Hayman, and others, London artists were transformed into a privately funded independent profession, and the Royal Academy became a cultural institution focused on teaching and exhibition. In an engaging narrative Fordham (assistant professor, University of Virginia) contends that Britain’s world wars and domestic political dissension were essential elements in the creation of a national school of art.

Fordham’s focus on the Seven Years War spares few in the British political and social establishment. The author argues that the imperial situation had a significant impact on artistic production, citing events such as the death of General James Wolfe at Quebec in 1759, the focus of several major works including those of James Barry and American Benjamin West, who was greatly influenced by the artists of the Royal Academy. Memorialized in death, Wolfe as a military icon was influenced more by artists’ renderings than military genius. The author concludes artists reached alliances with the political leadership while maintaining creative integrity. His argument withstands historical scrutiny and is a solid contribution to the social, cultural, and intellectual history of Britain in the last half of the eighteenth century and an important contribution to the early history of the Royal Academy.

Fordham explores beyond such books as William Vaughn’s British Painting: The Golden Age (1999) and the more dated The Great Century of British Painting (1971) by art historian William Gaunt. The eighty-seven black and white illustrations are splendidly reproduced and effective, although some may argue they should maintain their original color (an argument weakened by today’s printing costs). This volume includes paintings as well as many political and satirical engravings and is a work of serious scholarship aimed at scholars and historians.

Fordham’s extensive notes supplement the text and serve as an invaluable resource for historians who will find these notes as essential reading. The exhaustive bibliography is an asset but the eight-page bibliography is disappointing considering the comprehensive nature of the work. The result is a handsome book of original research, combining historical research with quality illustrations in a narrative certain to make a significant contribution to British cultural history and the rich history of Britain’s golden age of art.

Art librarians will want to add this somewhat expensive monograph to their collections as will bibliographers considering broader historical texts. This selection is a well-produced book which should stand both tests—as a historical monograph and a physical book.

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