
In this book Hans Belting reveals a challenging story of influences and progressions that produce interesting results by studying the role of perspective using the metaphor of the gaze. In Western art, mastery of perspective becomes a turning point in the visual world during the Renaissance, while the Arabic origin and definition of perspective remains in the scientific realm. Belting enhances his arguments by discussing a particular idea and then countering it, or as he refers to it, "shifting focus/exchanging glances" from the West to the East and then vice versa (a Blickwechsel). Not only does he posit the use and understanding of perspective in art (East/West) but also art and science (East/West) and then science (East/West). This creates complex and exciting relationships.

Belting starts by examining the definitions of perspective as symbolic form as discussed by Panofsky and other Western art historians. However, this definition does not translate in the same way into the Arabic nonpictorial realm. Therefore, perspective is perceived in one sphere as a cultural tradition and in the other it remains on the scientific plane. After examining non-representational images as a cultural and religious phenomenon in Islamic culture, the author investigates the seminal work on optics and the perfection of the camera obscura by the eleventh-century Arabic mathematician Alhazen, whose works were translated into Latin and was known to medieval scholars. The translation of the book was titled Perspectiva which ultimately led to the modern use of the word "perspective." The leap from a mathematical study to one that was adapted in pictorial works occurred in the Western world in the fifteenth century. Belting also investigates the seventeenth-century Dutch astronomer Johannes Kepler whose further studies in optics resulted in a lens being used outside of the human eye and lays the groundwork for it being used to capture visual images through photography.

Belting then shifts the focus to a Western perspective discussing uses and applications of perspective as applied by Renaissance artists therefore shifting the gaze to a different level than had been previously executed and experienced. By first focusing on Brunelleschi and his use of perspective, especially in stage sets for theatrical productions, Belting counters this with a discussion of muqarnas, the popular Islamic decorative element that plays with geometric form, perspective, and light and serves as a symbolic form in Arabic art. Belting concludes with a philosophical discussion of perspective as a symbolic form and its relationship to the gaze. The Western perspective is then contrasted to the Arabic Mashrabiyya, an architectural element used as a screen as a window which lets in light and offers a different type of gaze and symbolic form.

The book is challenging and engaging and is highly recommended for major research libraries.

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