
Do not judge this book by its cover, but do buy it! It fills a gap in one’s book collection that one probably never knew existed, and it does so brilliantly. Its only liability is the serious and astute but highly respectable cover image of Murdock Pemberton on a dull, dark background. This dust jacket belies the irreverent wit, highly readable fonts, and polished contemporary design inside.

Pemberton was the first art critic of the New Yorker magazine, hired by the editor Harold Ross in 1925. It was a tumultuous time for art in the United States, a bit more than a decade after the paradigm-shifting Armory Show. During Pemberton’s tenure at the New Yorker, he gave his readers honest, forthright impressions—a forerunner of the all too rare, clear, and precise critics like today’s Adam Gopnik, also of the New Yorker. Pemberton’s words appeared in the “Talk of the Town” and “Art Galleries” columns. He spoke about painting, ceramics, dealers, museums, dance, and sculpture. He wrote mostly about the New York art world but also had the opportunity to visit Paris where he saw the works of Degas, an artist he especially admired and who he felt “never tired of catching the varying moods of flesh and in all the bathing women there is reflected that richness and variety that made him famous.”

This large book, in size and scope, is a feast for the eyes and the mind. It is not a typical biography but a medley of documents and words that provide an overview of a fascinating life. Pemberton’s granddaughter Sally, the author of this exceptional work, has discovered a treasure of vital, visual archival material with which she intersperses excerpts and images of the critic’s columns. She uses an inviting format, presenting dealers, collectors, art institutions, and artists for her readers, who, as they turn the pages, will find a glorious Marin watercolor followed by a photograph of Demuth; or a letter from Stieglitz to Pemberton—and then a list of delightfully impertinent questions about the Metropolitan Museum of Art, e.g. “Don’t you have enough Sargents?”

This book offers a new definition of the scrapbook for the 21st century, if by scraps one means the fascinating ephemera of a life documented and a book well-organized, highly readable, and striking. There is an excellent index, bibliography and list of illustrations. It is well suited to all types of libraries and essential for academic and museum art collections.

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