Since the 1980s, the Chinese art world has exploded. This has led to an overwhelming number of publications on contemporary Chinese art, yet few works survey the vast scope of Chinese art since the nineteenth century. This work, by Julia Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, both very respectable scholars in the field, is a welcome effort to present this diverse area in one volume.

Beginning with the nineteenth century, the authors develop a good background through a discussion of the impact that pivotal artists had on Chinese painting of the early twentieth century. Then various trends are discussed from the beginning of the twentieth century until mid-century. This includes the effects of Western influences, amid the role of more traditional art forms, as well as an examination of the woodcut print movement that reflected growing social concerns in the 1920s and 1930s. Such trends are discussed up to the founding of the People’s Republic when the role of art is co-opted by political concerns during the Maoist period.

The authors present all of these trends in order to explain crossover influences from one tradition or style to another. Of note, the art of the Maoist era is given clear precedents and grounding in earlier trends in China’s own visual arts, as well as more frequently recognized outside influences.

Although early post-Mao era art is covered along with the art of Taiwan and Hong Kong, the earlier depth of this book seems to dissipate when a clear and careful examination is most needed. The final chapter on art in the new millennium seems to be little more than a list of the growing number of exhibition venues and biennials. This is important in that it illustrates China’s strong art market. However, almost no attention is given to the artists, their ideas and concerns. What is it that drives the contemporary Chinese artist? What political, social and spiritual concerns need to be considered? Here the reader is left disappointed.

Of far greater value is Lu Peng’s massive paperback survey of twentieth-century Chinese art, A Pocket History of 20th-Century Chinese Art (2010). This book gives the reader considerable depth, insight and context for contemporary Chinese art within the scope of its recent history.

The Art of Modern China is intended for the general reader and the student as well. Layout is clear, and it is illustrated with good quality plates. The book also includes a glossary, timeline, notes, a brief bibliography, and an index.

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