
In ...Isms: Understanding Modern Art author Sam Phillips introduces art movements starting with impressionism and ending with internationalism. Organized as a guidebook through time, artists, and public collections, the volume is broadly divided into six color-coded chapters. Within this framework Phillips introduces fifty-five movements, the artists most closely associated with them, and the relationships between them.

Each movement is introduced using a standardized format that includes visual icons explaining its origin - whether it was a trend within the visual arts or a part of a larger cultural current, or whether it was defined by the artists themselves or retrospectively delineated. These radial acronyms are useful for quickly understanding the origin of a movement but are placed at the margin of the header and might be overlooked in quick consultation. The rest of the entry is cleverly divided up using clock icons to indicate the introduction, primary artists, key words, and the main definition. The latter broadly introduces the movement through cultural, artistic, and visual analysis but adds a level of specificity to entries that allows an interested reader to explore further. An example of this can be found in the entry for minimalism, where in addition to broadly introducing the style, Phillips also cites and quotes Donald Judd’s essay, “Specific Objects.” Icons are also used to connect readers to both related and contradictory trends. Each entry highlights the most well-known artists who “epitomize” the movement, one or two representative artworks from a select public collection, and suggested artists and works that can be found in the collection housing the artwork illustrating the entry. The final “Reference” section includes a “Glossary of Artists,” “Glossary of Useful Terms,” a “Chronology of Isms,” and “List of Museums to Visit.”

Packed with graphically accessible information this book introduces important movements in modern art in a concise and accessible format. It also creates a context for understanding the relationships between key trends in modern art. As with any easily-portable guidebook much has to be edited out, and the issue of excluding important artists who do not neatly fit into an artistic style is addressed by Phillips in his introduction. For example, he explains the omission of the influential artist Frida Kahlo because she, “was influenced by surrealism, but did not epitomize the movement.”

This publication is well-suited for the art enthusiast and would make an ideal travel companion for gallery or museum visits. Its strength lies in its ability to illustrate the connections between various movements. Due to its small size and graphic layout, important information is easily accessible. Recommended for public libraries, libraries serving undergraduates, and museum library collections.

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