
Rather than striving for conventional history, Colossal uses the evidence of the making of monumental structures — preparatory drawings, publicity materials, photographs, text, and models — to explore the ideas that shaped these projects. Grigsby (Professor of Art History, The University of California, Berkeley) relates historical events to traditional artistic concerns such as space, line, shadow, and depth, and touches on many subjects in rapid succession. The author compares the effects of early photographs and etchings on how a viewer understands colossal spaces or structures, the difference between subjective and objective reproduction, and ideas of modernity and imperialism. She discusses whether volume or mass was of paramount importance to the late nineteenth-century builders and engineers, and how work was used as a measure of the immensity of a project.

Although the book is organized into roughly chronological order, each chapter is arranged as a collection of short essays examining related concepts from the same historical period, rather than following one central narrative or idea. By briefly alluding to historical works and figures, Grigsby assumes a certain level of familiarity with the nineteenth and early twentieth-century periods. However, the author does provide detailed notes for further study.

The text alone is short and interesting enough that it would suit a small book size that a reader could carry easily. However, since the visual imagery is so central to an understanding of the text, the work had to be printed in the traditional large art book/coffee-table book format, on heavy, sizable, glossy pages. The reproductions are well-printed and large, with a very good level of detail, and at least the hardcover book is sewn through the fold rather than perfect bound, which should keep it in one piece even if thrown repeatedly into an undergraduate’s backpack.

Although Colossal relates to the history of engineering, the work is much more akin to art criticism because the author relies so heavily on visual analysis. Her thoughts on mass and the visual representation of space would be particularly useful to an architecture student. Although the book can stand on its own, the author skims the surface of a host of sources and historical facts. So the book would better serve as an addition to a strong collection of histories of the nineteenth century, rather than a library’s sole work on the topic.

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