

Book Reviews

Jack A. Hobbs ART IN CONTEXT

3rd edition. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, [1975, 1980] 1985. Paperback; 360 pages; 238 black and white illustrations, 32 color plates.

Art in Context has many of the qualities needed for a stimulating and practical high school or university text. Jack Hobbs' writing is free of pretentious jargon and dry pedantry. His book includes an adequate index and a 16 page glossary, and each chapter is supplemented with suggestions for further reading. Like Albert E. Elsen's Purposes of Art ([1962] 1972), Art in Context does not shackle itself with a strict chronological format, and instead presents themes separately, meandering back and forth in time throughout the first two of the book's three sections. A chronological approach is then used in section three, which surveys 20th century art, venturing as far as Conceptualism and Neo-Expressionism, with a tentative peek at post-modernism. Hobbs also includes helpful charts that list chronologically all of the book's many illustrations.

Hobbs has contextualized art in three general ways: section one deals with the "Perceptual Context," section two with the "Human Context," and section three with the "Historical Context." Members of the Social Theory Caucus--some of whom are acknowledged by Hobbs in the book's preface--will want to ask: what about the social context? Although Hobbs in no way ignores it, he discusses it irregularly and as a secondary focus. While some people will be unsatisfied with this approach, others will find Hobbs' wide view to be refreshing.

Unlike Lanier (1987), Hobbs does not see contextualization as being in opposition to formalism. In the book's first section, Hobbs depicts

one of art's contexts as being the relationship between "the visual elements." For example, colours in any painting "are part of a context" because "our perception of each color is affected by the others in the picture" (p.22). But the notion of the visual elements is, itself, never adequately placed within its own historical context. Hobbs states the "Artists of all sorts," and, by implication, from all eras, "...are always basically concerned with the visual elements" (p.15). Yet the popularization of formalism as the fundamental basis for art is a product of the modernist era, a fact not analyzed in Hobbs' book. Also unanalyzed is the role of strict formalism in diverting the perceiver's attention away from art's social context.

Later in the book's first section, Hobbs does allude to the social context of some forms of architecture, such as the function of balloon frame wooden house construction during America's rapid development (p.86). But he neglects social aspects of other architectural examples. He tells us about the large, flowing Japanese house, concentrating on how its design suits the Japanese's psychological notions of entry into "the peace and harmony of the inside" (pp.109-110). Yet broader social questions--such as what percent of Japan's crowded population enjoy the spacious accommodations Hobbs described--are not addressed.

The book's second section contains a discussion of four artists, which, while instructive, tends to romantically present the

artist as a hero struggling against the Philistines. This section also has chapters on "Images of Nature," "Men and Women," and "Images of America." The latter chapter mentions art's relationship to urbanization, social class values, and cultural minorities. The chapter on the sexes is frank, but with a heterosexual bias. While Hobbs investigates sexuality as it pertains to the female nude, to the male nude painted by women, and to art works depicting men and women together, he fails to acknowledge the beauty and values that homosexual sensitivity has endeavored to convey. This failure is especially apparent in his treatment of the male nude during the Classical Greek and Renaissance periods. There is also a failure to strongly critique the depiction of women as sex objects for men (pp.155, 158-159, 163-164), and as Eves, Delilahs, and Pandoras perpetrating the world's evils.

Of course, any book can be easily criticized for what it fails to contain. Here such criticism must be balanced with mention of the many enriching insights that Art in

Context does provide. Hobbs' strength is not in primary historical research; the book exhibits very little of that. Rather, he carefully synthesizes secondary research in a provocative yet sensitive manner. He allows no chapter to slip in unpolished. His interpretations achieve adequate depth without barraging us with extraneous facts. He is also a master at choosing just the right art work to exemplify his point, and he skillfully draws us back to certain works to illustrate different ideas throughout the book. Hobbs' economy and readability lend themselves to a text for students who have little patience with wading through trivia before arriving at germane concepts.

Conservatives will stick with Janson ([1962] 1969), while Marxists and feminists will continue their search for a more ideologically correct text. But many others will find Art in Context to be an intelligent, carefully conceived, broadly scoped, well packaged alternative approach to art history and criticism. In the context of today's art education, such alternatives are indeed welcome.

References

- Elsen, Albert E. ([1962] 1972). Purposes of Art (3rd ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.
- Janson, H.W. ([1962] 1969). History of Art (2nd ed.). New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
- Lanier, V. (1987). A*R*T, a friendly alternative to DBAE. Art Education, 40(5), 46-52.

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