

## **Gene Mittler** **ART IN FOCUS**

Peoria, IL: Glencoe Publishing Co., 1986. Hardback, 448 pages, 401 illustrations (245 black and white, 156 color).

In the past two decades researchers and practitioners in the field, and more recently the Getty Institute, have developed the emerging concept of discipline-based art education (DBAE). In structuring the book Art In Focus around art criticism, art history, and studio, Gene Mittler attempts to incorporate three of the widely accepted components of the DBAE paradigm into a single work. Mittler does not directly include the generally acknowledged fourth component of aesthetics in his work, although the concept of aesthetic consciousness on the parts of the artist and the viewer is implied throughout the book.

The book is divided into two major sections. The first section consists of three critical chapters which establish the foundation for the rest of the book.

The first chapter states the purpose of the book and how it should be used. Mittler contends that the purpose of the book is to expand the readers' understanding of art and ultimately their capacity to express themselves in art whether by the creation of visual images or by making personal decisions and judgments about artworks. Since Art In Focus is designed as an interactive matrix of activities in criticism, history and studio, one is well advised to follow the author's suggested methodology as outlined in this first chapter.

The second chapter provides a thorough review of the elements and principles of art which Mittler characterizes as the "visual vocabulary." The presentation of this basic material is done with economy and precision.

The third chapter is probably the most relevant part of the book for the art educator. In this chapter Mittler identifies and compares the basic methodologies employed by the art critic and the art historian. These distinct methods and their respective operations serve as models in the study periods of art history in the subsequent chapters of the second section.

Mittler contends that the methodology of both the critic and the historian can be grounded in the four basic operations of description, analysis, interpretation and judgment. The idea of the art critic using these operations is certainly not new. Feldman and others have developed this model for pedagogical art criticism. Mittler proposes to relate these same four steps to the methods employed by the art historian. He states that the art historian uses the operation of description as a process of discovering factual information about the artwork, such as when and where it was created. According to Mittler the operation of analysis for the art historian relates to the unique features comprising the work's artistic style, while the operation of interpretation focuses on the influence of external events and conditions as they affect the artist and the work. Judgment would center on the importance of the artwork in the history of art.

The author maintains that in order to understand a work fully, the student should employ both criticism and history. He states the art historical method enables one to learn more about a work from an external standpoint. By compari-

son, the art criticism method enables the student to learn from the work based on the perspective gained through personal insight.

The material contained in the third chapter will be most helpful in correlating the study of art history to that of art criticism. This chapter enables the teacher to bridge a gap students may perceive between these two disciplines.

In addition, chapter three has a strong section on art theories and aesthetic qualities. For the student unfamiliar with art theory, the section serves as a basic introduction. Mittler effectively relates these theories to the process of criticism.

The second section of the text, comprising three quarters of the content, primarily surveys major works of art in a standard historical chronology beginning with prehistoric art. Each chapter in this section provides a general narrative focused on the artists and art of the period under review. With only a few exceptions the works selected for study appear in practically all general art history textbooks.

The chapters in this second section of Art In Focus are written in clear and concise language. The book can be read by a broad range of students at the secondary and college levels.

Along with the narrative, Mittler places within each chapter color coded sections that contain art history and criticism questions related to the works under investigation. The reader is first advised to study the illustrations and the questions contained within the captions as a means of sharpening personal skills in criticism and art history. Upon completion of this process one is instructed to read the main body of the chapter. In essence, the reader is encouraged to respond initially to the art at a systematic, yet personal level, then

proceed to acquire insight from the text. If in fact this process is followed, an innovative approach inviting personal response and interaction can occur, rather than a passive acceptance too frequently associated with many introductory art courses.

Each chapter in section two ends with several suggested studio experiences supposedly related to the previously studied period. While many of these activities do effectively relate to the periods covered, in several instances it is difficult to see clear correlations. Also, several of the suggested studio experiences, such as the creation of a mosaic wall plaque from ceramic tesserae in conjunction with the study of Byzantine art, are rather ambitious given the normal time restraints of the typical art class.

A weakness in these chapters that examine the periods of art history is the periodic failure to relate the artworks to a broader view of culture and social concerns. This observation is based on the assumption that art does reflect the values and concerns of the society in which it is created. Mittler's examination of Greek art illustrates this weakness. Throughout the chapter there is direct reference made to key concepts underlying Greek art, such as humanism, Platonic thought, and the Golden Section. Similar observations can be made in other areas, such as the discussion of nineteenth century movement of Realism without reference to the impact of the emerging philosophy of Positivism. In short, many of the art periods covered could be strengthened by referencing them to a more comprehensive social and historical context.

Art In Focus is based almost entirely on the Western art tradition. As a postscript a brief chapter on the art of non-western cultures is provided at the end of

the text. Rather than placing this material at the conclusion, a more effective format would have been to incorporate it within the chronology of the art periods. As an example, the wonderful illustration of the cast bronze sculptures from the Benin culture of Nigeria would have had greater impact if presented in one of the sections related to ancient art.

Nevertheless, Art In Focus sensitively addresses the contributions of minorities and women to the development of Western art. With the introduction of Sofonisba Anguissola, a highly competent portrait artist of the Renaissance, Mittler provides consistent examples of accomplished women artists. The same can be said for his treatment of Afro-American artists, such as Tanner and Bannister, to cite only two.

Another notable section deals with the Mexican Mural Group. The author examines the work of such notable artists as Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros. Also, the impact of these Mexican artists on the development of art in the United States is effectively covered.

The overall design and format of the book is sound. Ample illustrations of good quality are provided with a substantial number of color plates interspersed in the text.

The author has provided several features that are especially helpful to the teacher using the textbook. In section two a listing of artists with brief biographical data is

provided at the first of each chapter. A phonetic breakdown for the pronunciation of artists' names is also beneficial. The appendices contain a series of criticism and history experiences for each chapter that will be valuable for the instructor, followed by a section of art-related careers and a glossary of terms. A complete bibliography arranged by chapters, plus a chart of periods, styles and artists should also be useful.

An individual considering the adoption of the book for classroom use may have questions concerning the intended audience. In some instances it could be used as an art textbook at the secondary level, provided the course is an in-depth study. Art In Focus can also serve as an effective introductory art text at the freshman and sophomore college levels. Indeed, it provides a viable alternative to several current art appreciation textbooks such as Artforms and Living With Art.

In conclusion, Art In Focus is appropriate as a resource text for the instructor at the secondary or college level. It can function as an effective primary or supplementary text for courses directed toward the preparation and training of art teachers. Art In Focus should be in the professional library of art teachers who are interested in current curriculum developments in the field of art education.

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