

Edmund Burke Feldman **THINKING ABOUT ART**

Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1985. Paperback, 466 pages.

For the student of art or an art "civilian" Thinking About Art by Edmund Burke Feldman offers an opportunity to expand one's appreciation of art visually and intellectually. The author's three main purposes for the book: "to stimulate thought about art, to encourage discussion about artistic ideas and to give pleasure" are truly fulfilled in this reader.

The book begins with a discussion of the "Importance of Art." Here, one finds the thesis of the book that "art is important because it expresses meanings and because it creates effects and causes results". Thinking About Art then proceeds to explain the ways in which the visual arts can do this.

In order to understand art today and yesterday, Feldman knows that a lot of groundwork must be done. The "Importance of Art," the first chapter, discusses "What is Art?", "Who Creates Art?", and "What Are the Uses of Art?". Although these seem to be ordinary questions, Feldman does an extraordinary job of laying down interesting answers, particularly in his discussion of "Who Creates Art," discussing such types as the well known artists and their teams to the anonymous craftsmen, their identities lost to us while their achievements remain to inspire; the magicians and sorcerers, possibly the first artists; and ending with the advent of machines and technology that have shared in the process of artmaking since the Industrial Revolution. In a section on the uses of art, Feldman explains the possibilities of moral, religious, political and aesthetic reasons and uses for creating art. He chooses superb examples of artwork created by artists making

powerful visual statements concerning human issues.

The second chapter, "The Language of Art," provides the reader with the vocabulary and understanding to talk about, think about and enjoy art. "How Does Art Speak?" discusses the elements and principles of design. What could be dry stuff comes alive because of Feldman's style. He refers to art we know in unique ways, for example this discussion of Cezanne and Van Gogh. "For their ability to create feelings of unity and coherence we can be grateful to two modern painters: Cezanne, obsessed with finding order in a mountain he painted again and again; and Vincent van Gogh, discovering the painful harmony of the universe in a pair of sunflowers."

Before we get any further, let me mention that the color reprints used throughout the book are of the finest quality, on a smooth, substantial weight paper offering the reader a treasure of intriguing images, many of which are not common examples of artists' work. Each carefully chosen reproduction is accompanied by an explanatory paragraph that gives the reader additional insight supplementing the main text of the book. As I turned each page I found myself looking forward to both of these learning devices.

Chapter three, "Ancient and Medieval Art," chapter four, "Renaissance and Baroque Art," and chapter five, "The Modern World" use about one third of the book to give us the historical spectrum of western art. While art history is sequential, Feldman reminds us that in its evolution, art consists of many streams of development feeding into

each other, intersecting, running parallel, or going underground and coming up as springs in unexpected places. He also reminds us that when Leonardo was painting the Madonna and St. Anne (1510 A.D.) about the same time an Aztec sculptor was carving The Goddess Tlazoltlotl Giving Birth to Centeotl, God of Corn, pointing out how artistic activity goes on continuously throughout the world. These chapters on the history of art outline major artists, movements and styles, clearly describing how religion, politics, economics, the ruling class and the human condition influenced and/or controlled the artistic endeavors. Again, I found in the text, revealing aspects and perspectives on art history. In each period Feldman discusses whatever art form was prevalent or outstanding at the time and what influences were involved, as well as cultural context and cross-cultural perspective.

The last five chapters deal with individual media and art forms: "Painting," "Sculpture," "Architecture," "The Crafts and Design," "Printmaking, Photography, and Film." In these chapters, Feldman emphasizes critical and aesthetic factors that make each artwork more meaningful and enjoyable. The intention is not to teach a person how to create art but to get more out of an encounter with art. Chapter six, "Painting," for example, goes into all the aspects of this art form, such as "The Paint Itself," "Drawing While Painting," "Enjoying Drawing Alone," "Light, Color," "Enjoying Color," "Pleasure in Painting: Execution," "Enjoying Space," "Enjoying Form in Space," and "Energy in Painting." These chapters take the reader into the art experience in a way inaccessible to art history. They help the reader to appreciate the uniqueness of each art form, the problems and solutions that artists encounter.

Chapter nine, "The Crafts and Design," discusses a more utilitarian art form which, because of its nature, is intrinsically involved with craftsmanship and design related to function. Here Feldman examines a range of issues focused on the questions of craftsmanship and quality in design. He includes an analysis of bad craft and bad art which he classifies as exhibiting incompleteness, inauthenticity, incongruity and inflation. According to Feldman, any work of art can suffer from these if the artist is insensitive to the "aesthetic signalling" projected through design and craftsmanship. In a section on the pleasure of good design he delineates seven aspects that a well designed object should contain and the pleasure that good design will convey.

The last chapter, "Printmaking, Photography, and Film" deals with these media as art forms as well as examining the relationship between the traditional arts and the modern communication arts. Here, more than anywhere else, he delves into the use of art in expressing social issues. He examines the great printmakers, photographers and filmmakers who used their art to educate the public about social injustices and conditions. The text contains descriptions of the various techniques of printmaking, the issues of originality, and the impact of reproduced art. Woodcuts, wood engravings, intaglios, engravings, etchings, lithography, and silk screen are various methods discussed in creating a print pattern. Photography, film, and television are described as using light to create the print pattern for reproducing images. Discussion of these latest technological developments requires basically the same artistic language as earlier forms and affords more people the opportunity to enjoy and react to such a wide variety of visual arts.

Thinking About Art would make an excellent textbook for many art courses, especially focusing on art appreciation and criticism. It is informative, interesting, and

stimulates creative thought and discussion about art. Feldman has revealed to us the power of art to make us truly see, encounter and experience the world.

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