

KEEPING AN EYE OPEN: ESSAYS ON ART BY JULIAN BARNES

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JULIAN BARNES
WINNER OF THE MAN BOOKER PRIZE

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Review

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“[Barnes] digs into fascinating details of isometric proportions. . . Highly recommended to all art readers.” —Peter S. Kaufman, Library Journal

“Perceptive and entertaining. . . . Anyone with a serious interest in art will enjoy these essays, no matter their level of knowledge. This is a book to be read and reread for both information and pleasure.” —Sara Catterall, Shelf Awareness

“Barnes puzzles over the intimate lives of artists and casts a generous and discerning eye over the small, painterly decisions that imbue a canvas with force. . . . Great art can take all we’ve got to throw at it, and as time passes, whatever we throw turns to dust and the art remains. Barnes knows this. Indeed, he revels in it. Great art, to him, is an interrogator and a liberator. The more we look, the more our presumptions shatter.” —Cate McQuaid, The Boston Globe

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About the Author

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An extraordinary collection—hawk-eyed and understanding—from the Man Booker Prize–winning, best-selling author of *The Sense of an Ending* and *Levels of Life*.

As Julian Barnes notes: “Flaubert believed that it was impossible to explain one art form in terms of another, and that great paintings required no words of explanation. Braque thought the ideal state would be reached when we said nothing at all in front of a painting . . . But it is a rare picture that stuns, or argues, us into silence. And if one does, it is only a short time before we want to explain and understand the very silence into which we have been plunged.”

This is the exact dynamic that informs his new book. In his 1989 novel *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, Barnes had a chapter on Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*, and since then he has written about many great masters of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art, including Delacroix, Manet, Fantin-Latour, Cézanne, Degas, Redon, Bonnard, Vuillard, Vallotton, Braque, Magritte, Oldenburg, Lucian Freud and Howard Hodgkin. The seventeen essays gathered here help trace the arc from Romanticism to Realism and into Modernism; they are adroit, insightful and, above all, a true pleasure to read.

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29 of 29 people found the following review helpful.

My eyes were certainly opened

By Ralph Blumenau

This is a collection of 17 elegant and immensely knowledgeable essays in which Julian Barnes discusses some famous artists (all but three francophone) and their work. The paper copies of the book illustrate a certain number of the works in colour; the Kindle illustrations are a rather muddy black and white. But Barnes analyzes far more paintings than he can illustrate. Many of these are rather little known, and for these you will have to go to Google Images. This makes for very slow reading, but without such access the book loses a good deal of its value. I am grateful for the host of fascinating images to which I have been introduced by it.

He begins with an extended version of the essay on Géricault's "The Raft of the Medusa" he first published in "A History of the World in 10½ Chapters". He begins by giving us the historical facts of the sufferings of the castaways in 1816; then he discusses what elements of the story Géricault decided not to include in the painting and those he did, and where, both for emotional and for compositional reasons, he departed from that story.

The second chapter is about Delacroix, whom the world sees as a great Romantic painter, but who defined himself, for all his rivalry with Ingres, as "a purely classical artist", suspicious of innovations in art, aiming in his personal life for tranquillity, not for the passions; crustily conservative in his social views; a complex man full of contradictions.

On the other hand Courbet, an arrogant and self-advertising rebel, "had the egomania of the true Romantic", and his life and some of his works are well analyzed.

The chapter on Manet discusses a 2011 exhibition in Paris which deliberately showed several paintings of his that are little known - though they can be found on Google Images. Then Barnes discusses the National Gallery exhibition of 1993 which focussed entirely on Manet's "The Execution of Maximilian", whose three versions are compared in minute detail.

Even less well-known than the Manets in the 2011 exhibition are four canvasses by Fantin-Latour, showing groups of sombrely-dressed writers, painters and musicians - 34 altogether - without any of these artists communicating with each other. Barnes credits Bridget Alsdorf's study of this set with the explanation for this lack of communication.

Among the aperçus about Cézanne: "His portraits are all still lives", while Kandinsky wrote of him that "he raised still life to such a point that it ceased to be inanimate".

The chapter on Degas begins with the quotations from many critics that he hated women, was very likely impotent, and he reacted to them with "a mixture of voyeurism and abhorrence". Barnes won't have any of this: of course, he says, every painter has to be a voyeur, but he can see no abhorrence - only a fascination with the movements as a woman bathes, dries herself or combs her hair.

The chapter on Odilon Redon begins with a discussion of whether artists believed that marriage helped or hindered them: Redon believed the former. But for the rest of the chapter you will have to be a specialist or else to spend a lot of time on Google Images to follow Barnes' prolific references to the works of this hugely prolific artist - but it is worth the effort: his interpretation of the haunting images he discusses are fascinating.

Most people will know Bonnard through some of the 385 paintings Bonnard made of his wife Marthe, though we do not get from them any feeling about what Marthe was actually like. He himself said that "a figure should be a part of the background against which it is placed", so, present though she always is, she is subordinate to the often daring composition with its unusual perspectives. We also learn a good deal about Bonnard's landscape paintings.

In the chapter on Vuillard, Barnes protests against some of his paintings having been re-named "to tell a story", whereas his original titles implied that the story was not what mattered, but rather something more abstract - composition, colour etc. But his later, commissioned, portraits are of course more specific in their reference. Barnes is quite judgmental about these later paintings, praising some as great and dismissing others, sometimes without giving reasons, as failures - in one case even as kitsch. Once again, I was led by him to look at many images which were unfamiliar to me.

Same again with Vallotton, of whom Barnes himself was ignorant until he visited a gallery in Baltimore in the 1990s - there is only a single Vallotton in Britain. We learn about his life; and again a visit to Google Images will show the range and individual character of his work, and will enable you to decide whether you agree or disagree with Barnes' positive and negative evaluations of it.

Barnes is a great admirer of Braque: for his human and artistic integrity, his modesty, his laconicism, his knowledge of his own limitations; and there is an excellent account of his relationship with Picasso - in every way his opposite - after the latter had moved on from their joint development of Cubism.

I found the shortish chapter on Magritte rather obscure (and did not know that during the Second World War he had a period of Impressionism).

Oldenburg's work is next: it may be fun, but that's all. That leads to a chapter entitled "So Does It Become Art?" Is a plaster cast art? Photography? Barnes believes it is if it "engages the mind and the heart".

The powerful chapter on Lucian Freud is concerned mostly with the artist's character, "imperious in his perversity", and with the role it played in his portraits.

Finally a piece about Barnes' friend Howard Hodgkin: it takes the form of jottings, and, while it gives some picture of Hodgkin's personality, as far as his art is concerned I found it the least illuminating of the chapters. But then Barnes admits "I do not know how to put his pictures into words" - and Hodgkin himself, though he has given suggestive names to his abstract paintings, "doesn't want to talk about his own pictures, let alone 'explain' them." Barnes quotes his beloved Flaubert: "Explaining one artistic form [painting] by another [writing] is a monstrosity". Well, in the other essays Barnes has done just that - and to such good effect, too. But he concludes, perhaps chastened, "So that's enough words."

16 of 17 people found the following review helpful.

Brilliant Primer on How to Get the Best out of the Visual Arts

By Dr. Laurence Raw

Ostensibly *KEEPING AN EYE OPEN* is a history of modernist painting from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Barnes is especially interested in French painters both familiar and unfamiliar; he situates them in their contexts of production and offers trenchant judgments as to why they should be recognized as great artists. As well as being a novelist, Barnes shows what an acute art critic he is - someone who understands the power of Modernist art to move as well as inspire.

At heart, however, Barnes's collection of essays - previously published in various journals such as the *LONDON REVIEW OF BOOKS* and the *NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS* - is a primer on how to appreciate paintings. Rather than just looking at the images represented on different surfaces, he advocates an emotional response to painting. This requires us to understand how the images represent an outpouring of the artist's psychology; once we understand that, then we can understand what they might 'mean' in their own terms. Barnes's view is refreshingly different; hitherto I have always thought that paintings should have an easily definable meaning, appreciated only to those with sufficient historical and artistic knowledge to understand the artists' context of production, and how they reworked familiar images to make new statements. Barnes suggests quite the opposite; if we empathize with the painting, and approach them on our own terms, then the 'meanings,' as we understand them, will emerge. Painting is actually a form of artistic communication involving viewers just as much as the artists to complete the circuit of meaning,

Barnes explains the painters' lives and work in crisp, clear prose, but is seldom didactic. His view is that of a novelist, with an interest in the world around him and what it means to him. In that sense, he posits himself

as an 'ordinary' viewer, explaining what the paintings mean to him and inviting viewers (and readers) to complete the same interpretive process. KEEPING AN EYE OPEN is a wonderful dipping book; essays should be read in any order. Yet I think time should be taken to reflect on what Barnes says; his views could revolutionize the way we think about the visual arts.

12 of 13 people found the following review helpful.

Art Through the Novelist's Eye

By Roger Brunyate

Those who have read the stories of Julian Barnes will know how often he builds them around real figures in the arts: THE LEMON TABLE contains stories about Turgenev and Sibelius; Sarah Bernhart and the photographer Nadar play major roles in LEVELS OF LIFE; Flaubert gets a whole novel to himself (almost) in FLAUBERT'S PARROT; and a meticulous analysis of Géricault's painting "The Raft of the Medusa" forms the centerpiece of his HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN 10½ CHAPTERS. That essay is reprinted here, slightly expanded. It forms the beginning of a sequence of pieces on French-speaking artists of the 19th and 20th centuries -- Géricault, Delacroix, Courbet, Manet, Fantin-Latour, Cézanne, Degas, Redon, Bonnard, Vuillard, Vallotton, Braque, and Magritte -- followed by a few moderns: Claes Oldenburg, Lucian Freud, and Howard Hodgkin. I am finding it utterly addictive.

As a novelist, Barnes has an eye for the telling personal detail: Delacroix in a daze walking home to a house he had moved out of two years earlier; Courbet drinking himself into obesity and death; Cézanne losing his temper with a fidgety sitter. He compares Courbet to Fantin-Latour in terms of their portrayals of the community of artists, and Degas to Bonnard in terms of their attitudes to women; his entry into the proto-Surrealist work of Redon is the question of whether it matters if an artist is married. Littérateur that he is, Barnes also has an ear for what other writers have said about these artists: Maxime Du Camp describing Delacroix sorting skeins of wool; Baudelaire telling Manet "you are only the first in the degeneration of your art"; Huysmans' brilliant description of a Cézanne still life as "skewed fruit in besotted pottery."

But Barnes' approach is by no means entirely biographical. The Géricault essay, for instance, begins with a detailed description of the wreck of the Medusa and the ordeal of the survivors on the raft. He makes excellent points by considering all the episodes in the story that Géricault did NOT paint. But it is when he considers what he DID paint, that extraordinary group of half-naked figures reaching towards the distant ship, that his writing really takes off. He does something similar again in his second essay on Manet, considering the artist's three versions of "The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian" and its role as a political statement, but nonetheless tying it down to precise analysis of details such as the firing squad's hands and feet: "They are feet settling themselves in for useful work, like when a golfer shuffles for balance in a bunker. You can almost imagine the NCO's pre-execution pep-talk about the importance of getting comfortable, relaxing the feet, then the knees and the hips, pretending you're just out for a day's partridge or woodcock...".

"Fully illustrated in colour throughout" says the jacket flap. This is not true. The color illustrations (two or three per essay) are indeed of excellent quality and printed on thick creamy paper.* But they tend to be details rather than the full picture, and often of works peripheral to the artist's more famous oeuvre. I understand the logic of that: Barnes gives you the things that are hard to find, knowing that you can turn to the internet for the rest. I found myself reading with iPad by my side, not only reminding myself of the masterpieces, but also seeking out things that I had never even heard of until Barnes mentioned them. For example Akseli Gallen-Kallela's "Symposium" (1894), "a Munchishly hallucinatory group portrait set at the Kämp Hotel in Helsinki after much drink has been taken." Interesting in that one of stupefied figures is the composer Jean Sibelius, but also because one side of the picture is taken up by "a pair of deep-red raptor's wings. The Mystery of Art has just called in on them, but is now flying away." Barnes' art criticism, like his

stories, is full of unexpected trouvailles like that. But the heart of all his essays is his invocation of masterpiece after masterpiece, in words so full of visual detail that you almost do not need the physical reproductions. Almost, but not quite: for only when you look at the pictures do you realize just how right Barnes is, time after time.

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I originally wrote the above review (and awarded the five-star rating) when I was halfway through, after the essay on Bonnard. I was not surprised by its quality; Barnes is deeply immersed in the French nineteenth century. Reading on, though, I have to admit that my interest dropped off. Although still full of good observations, the later essays did not always achieve that miraculous balance between art, personality, and history. The essay on Vuillard seemed to miss the man; the one on Vallotton failed to convince about the genius; the piece on Oldenburg gave no good reason why it had been written at all; and the article on Lucian Freud succeeded only in conveying the impression of a very unpleasant individual. But even at the end, there were joys. His piece entitled "So does it become Art?" is Barnes at his best, taking an out-of-the-way subject -- plaster casts of dead bodies in 19th-century France and in our own time -- and deriving some very pertinent questions about the nature of art. And in the last essay of all, "Words for H.H.", Barnes does more for his old friend Howard Hodgkin than for any other artist in the book, by admitting to the limitations of words, and sketching a dance of friendship instead -- and by linking him to his great love of over a century before, the novelist Gustave Flaubert. So to the last line in the book: "So that's enough words." No more are needed.

*My comments on the paper, printing, and quality of the reproductions apply to the British edition. I cannot speak to the American one, which appears to be in a rather different format.

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