

*Stories of Art*. By JAMES ELKINS Routledge. 2002. pp. xv + 176. £11.99.

ACROSS in America there is a growing groundswell of complaint against Eurocentric, untheorized, male dominated, gay neglectful, racially unaware art historical survey textbooks. This book addresses this situation. It starts with possible pictures of art history, including maps, and intuitive stories. It then proceeds to discuss the 'old' and 'new' stories that have actually been written. There is a chapter on 'non-European' stories, and the book concludes by examining possible perfect stories. As ever, James Elkins's thoughts are provocative and there is plenty to agree or disagree with.

One point must be made immediately, and Elkins himself makes it: there is a limit to what one can achieve in a one-volume book. One wonders why, in that case, he should have included the multi-volume Russian *Universal History of Art* except to make the point that the Soviet Union had a policy of inclusion towards its nationalities and fellow-travellers. The *Encyclopedia of World Art* aimed at even greater inclusiveness but it was a huge work and hardly a story of art. To be a story a text has to have a dominant narrative, otherwise it falls apart into smaller stories. Without any narrative at all it turns into an assemblage of facts and descriptions. But the books are growing in size and even Gombrich complained about the weight of the last edition of his *Story of Art*.

Aside from production values, the physical growth of survey volumes marks their widening compass. Early in the twentieth century a survey would have been based upon a dominantly Western tradition of artistic production with glances in the direction of tribal and oriental art. In the modern Western tradition it would have been dominated by works from the great male artists with heterosexual ocular preoccupations. More recent texts have aimed at greater inclusivity towards world cultures and greater sensitivity towards matters of race and gender.

Elkins wonders what is going on in his students' minds and asks them to draw pictures or maps of their images of art history. While this might be entertaining, one wonders whether it is particularly illuminating as neither pictures nor maps are stories. One issue that this does raise, however, is the difference between people's knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance. My telling an audience my story of art would not include all the objects of my acquaintance. A good storyteller addresses her audience's interests at the same time as building their interest; Elkins's pictures and maps do

little more than demonstrate partiality and randomness. In 1975, Michael Compton, a Keeper at the Tate, made the observation that in England

working-class or lower-middleclass-people . . . had in their minds only three historical concepts. They were the modern, roughly the life-time of the people concerned; there was a period called Victorian, which ended in 1945 and began in approximately 400 A.D.; and there was a period of pre-history, which ended, roughly speaking, with the Romans, but included things like dinosaurs and trilobites and so forth, so that nobody would have been the least surprised if Julius Caesar had ridden a dinosaur into whatever battles he fought. (Los Angeles, Museums Symposium)

Life has moved on a bit since 1975, but it would still be instructive to hear people's rough stories and surmises.

Like many other writers, the author locates the emergence of art historical writing with the tradition started by Vasari, but given the fact that people who read Vasari read other texts as well, this is rather skewed. Vasari drew his models from Classical authors and every well-educated adult interested in art knew their Cicero, Pliny, and Quintilian, let alone the great historians. The rhetoricians lay the groundwork for appreciating stylistic difference, Pliny for thinking about technical matters, and Herodotus was a mine of history and anecdote. Then, as Panofsky has already pointed out, the other historians come into play as well. But these were, of course, related to the history of the arts. The history of Art is quite another matter and Vasari did not concern himself with that, although he did have a use for the concept of *disegno*. After Vasari, evidence from Schlosser's *Die Kunstliteratur* demonstrates the prevalence of regionalism in following texts. The pre-modern stories were not powered by a monolithic Drive to the Real. Gombrich's *Story of Art* was not as simple as that either, though no one seems to have noticed the ecological theory behind it

New stories aim at greater inclusivity, but it should not thereby be thought that the older ones ignored non-European cultures. Educated people interested in art did find space for Oriental and Middle Eastern art among their mental furniture but this was a slightly exotic taste. In England such material is housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which is a museum of decorative arts. So-called tribal art was housed in ethnographic collections. The regulating concept behind the formation of these museums was the concept of 'fine art', born in England in the nineteenth century.

Granted that the concept of fine art emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century, is it legitimate to use that concept to understand pictorial or sculptural practices in other cultures? If fine art were a category like 'chair' but other cultures did not have a category 'chair', using

more general categories like 'furniture' or more limited ones like 'stool', there would not be a major issue over wanting to *inventorize* chairs but there might be an issue in *understanding* the functional place of chairs within the range of other possible artefacts. If fine art is marked off from 'decorative arts' and 'crafts', then it won't include carpets, or Athenian black-figure pottery. But should it then include craft-produced paintings or sculptures? Should the craft-produced decorations of Maori canoes stay, with Aboriginal paintings, in ethnography museums? Should the ethnography museums be aestheticized, like they are in Cambridge and London, or should they be left like the Pitt-Rivers, in Oxford, splendid classified displays of material culture? Arthur Danto addressed this issue in his review of the infamous 'Primitivism' exhibition (*The State of the Art*, 1987) as did other critics at the time.

Wouldn't it be a gross act of imperialism to extend the category of fine art into areas where it has not hitherto been used? Put like that, the question sounds rhetorical but there is a real enough current debate over the question of whether international art and international biennales are desirable.

As Elkins recognizes, the real problem behind a multicultural story of art is one of coherence. Without some kind of master narrative, chapters in the text find themselves parked next to each other for no apparent reason. Looking at other 'histories', which some are not, we find language and observations that are opaque to our way of thinking about art. There is an English translation of the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* but what is a non-practitioner of Chinese calligraphy to make of it at anything but a superficial level?

How can one write a culturally fair account of the history of art? Elkins treats this as a practical problem. On the basis of chronology, there would be a lot of empty pages at the beginning and unrealistically over-packed pages at the end. On the basis of geographical area, Greenland would get a lot of (empty) pages in comparison to a greatly reduced France and Italy. On the basis of languages, the same spaces would be given to Iroquoian, Italian, and Itelmen. There would be no story, just a collection of entries.

At this point, the end of the book, one begins to wonder whether the right questions are being asked. Isn't there an argument to be had over the question of quality and whether it can be written off as subjective preference? What might our grounds be for arguing that Rembrandt should be included in a history of art rather than, say, the more obscure neo-Classical painter Joseph-Marie Vien? Wouldn't writing a story of art be more like choosing a first eleven (cricket) rather than a top twenty (music)? But then that

assumes that the eleven are all playing the same game. Perhaps we are talking about landmarks rather than monuments, but then landmarks assume a direction of interest. The pubcrawler's landmarks are different from the architectural historian's. Is there such a thing as the ideal art spectator? Could we say that there are defining moments in the history of art such that a particular work, or group of works, introduces a major shift in practice? This would be along the lines of saying that the English language would never be the same again after Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton. Art would never be the same again after Leonardo. Another approach would be to ask who rates most highly in terms of offering a personal measure of human values. Of course there would be a variety of response but would it be possible to arrive at a reasoned consensus rather than a vote? There is no reason why a plurality of stories might not emerge out of differing consensual models but they would still have to make sense as coherent stories and they do not all have to be in one book. Thames & Hudson's *World of Art* series offers a useful alternative to the single all-encompassing text. Wouldn't it be a good idea to give up writing textbook histories of art altogether?

Just as an aside, for American readers, Gombrich's *Story of Art* was never written as a textbook but as a resource for people who would like some entry into his world of *Bildung*. Some people might want to see that world smashed, others might think it worth preserving but extended, as it always was, into new domains. *Bildung* was never static but expanded as interesting writers emerged, such as Ibsen, Strindberg, and Dostoevsky. Oriental and Middle Eastern texts always formed an important element of that tradition . . . and Sappho and Jane Austen.

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