Art and Artists IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

A discussion of the visual arts in both fiction and biography by current women novelists and scholars

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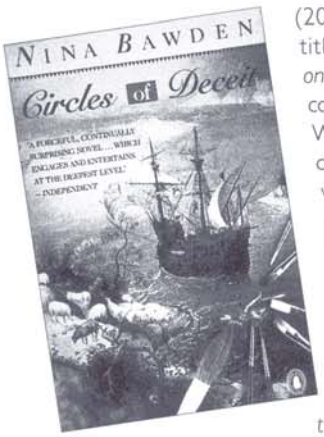
The number of writers who take a serious interest in the visual arts is a striking feature of much contemporary literature. This trend is, of course, not new in modern fiction: one need only recall Virginia Woolf's depiction of Lily Briscoe in **To the lighthouse** and her involvement with her sister Vanessa Bell's painting and with Roger Fry and the Bloomsbury artists in general. However, a whole new wave of novels centring on various aspects of art, as well as works on artists in the burgeoning area of actual biography seem to me worthy of specific comment.

One of the most fascinating recent books on the subject of art and literature is ***Patrick White, painter manqué** (2003) by Helen Verity Hewitt. The subtitle, *Paintings, painters and their influence on his writing* conveys some idea of Hewitt's concerns in her perceptive exploration of White's endeavour to absorb the power of visual works of art into his own writing. Drawing on her thorough research into the author's life and work, Hewitt achieves a study of remarkable depth and interest. Among the apposite quotations she cites from White is the following revealing passage:



'Roy de Maistre introduced me to abstract painting about 1936. Before that I had only approached writing as an exercise in naturalism.... Then came the terrors of abstract painting. As far as I was concerned, it was like jumping into space and finding nothing there at first.... Then gradually one saw that it was possible to weave about freely on different levels at one and the same time.'

Australian painters, including Tom Cleghorn, Ian Fairweather, Ralph Balson and, above all, Sidney Nolan, played a major role in White's depiction of the country and its culture. Although he declined to learn painting himself, White's work vividly suggests a conjunction between creative writing and art which helped him to surmount what he regarded as the limitations of words.

In contrast to Hewitt's scholarly exposition, there are many fictional approaches to the subject and one of the most provocative is Nina Bawden's consideration of value in **Circles of deceit** (short-listed for the 1988 Booker Prize). In the course of her narrative Bawden, or rather her characters, discuss such vexed issues as originality, plagiarism, fakery and the pre-requisites of value.

When a work of art is duplicated so exactly (as happens in **Circles of deceit**) that the two get muddled up and even the copyist can't tell the difference, where does intrinsic value reside? This is the question posed by Bawden who, like many before and since, cannot give a satisfactory answer.

This conundrum, which hinges partly on uniqueness and the distinction between copying (an accepted and legitimate tool of learning) and outright forgery, arises in the case of Christopher Peyt who has featured in several newspaper reports and arts commentaries lately. He runs a flourishing business in copies of old masters: all the works he sells are suitably aged and go for prices ranging from £2 000 to £200 000, though one customer was prepared to pay $25 million for a 'Gauguin'. This raises the question of perceived and intrinsic value, not to mention the whole problem of a grossly inflated contemporary art market.

According to the forger, Elmyr de Hory, who produced and distributed hundreds of fakes in Europe and the Americas, if 'certain persons' cannot tell a de Hory from the genuine article there is no real difference between the two. The fascinating but appalling story of this hoaxer and his collaborators was told in some detail by Clifford Irving in **Fake, the story of Elmyr de Hory, the greatest art forger of our time** (1969).

The role of the critic in the determination of value is one of the subjects of Siri Hustvedt's latest novel, **What I loved** (2003), in which she depicts the New York art scene of the 1970s and 80s. Her central characters are Bill Wechsler a painter, and his friend Leo Hertzberg who is an art historian. The book teems with ideas and is a gripping dissection of character and interpersonal dynamics. Hustvedt is herself a former art historian and has commented in an interview that writers like writing about art 'because it's a way of writing about writing'. More specifically, she divulges that the relationship between the fictive artist Bill and his wife Violet 'is, to some extent, based on my marriage' (that is, to the American author Paul Auster).

One of the difficulties Hustvedt faces in ***What I loved** is

the creation of a convincing body of works for her imaginary artist. Other writers have circumvented this difficulty by drawing on the works of real painters in their fictions. Joyce Cary used Stanley Spencer for the character of Gulley Jimson in **The horse's mouth** (1944), for instance, while John Updike's abstract expressionist in ***Seek my face** (2002) is a thinly-veiled portrait of Jackson Pollock. Both these artists have been used again recently: Evelyn Toynton bases her novel ***Modern art** (2000) on the short and turbulent life of Jackson Pollock, reinventing him as Clay Madden. But it is the fictionlised portrait of Lee Krasner in the figure of Belle Prokoff that gives the book its real strength. Somewhat like Lyris Crane in Shena Mackay's ***The artist's widow** (1998), Belle Prokoff struggles to emerge from the shadow of a dominant husband and to assert her own identity after years of deferring to the needs of her husband. (In passing it is interesting to note that Peggy Guggenheim, Pollock's most important patron, has been the subject of two biographies lately - by Anton Gill in 2001 and Mary Dearborn a year later. She was also very convincingly portrayed in Ed Harris's 2000 film, **Pollock**.)

In **Earth and heaven** (2000) Sue Gee is inspired by the lives of Stanley Spencer, Paul Nash and Eric Gill for her fictional characters. These partial inventions rub shoulders with such real-life personalities as Henry Tonks who was Professor of Fine Art at the Slade School of Art from 1918 to 1930 and who (somewhat risibly) threatened to resign if talk of Cubism continued. It is such snippets, as well as Gee's knowledge of the waves of European modernism entering Britain from 1920, which make this novel so rewarding.

Several other contemporary novelists have chosen not to present their artists incognito, as it were, but to imagine and speculate directly on their lives. In this large group one might mention Harriet Scott Chessman's **Lydia Cassatt reading the morning paper** (2003) which takes the eponymous picture of her mortally ill sister by the American Impressionist, Mary (or May) Cassatt (1844-1926) as its starting point. The book offers a tender portrait of sibling affection while also reflecting on the artist-model relationship.

In ***Old man Goya** (2002) Julia Blackburn reconstructs the last 35 years of Goya's life, basing her insights on the few known facts and her own imaginative conception of the artist left completely deaf after a serious illness in 1792. She argues that the horror of being 'excluded from the noise that makes things alive' totally altered his perspective on the world. Though not an entirely happy union of the fictional and factual modes, **Old man Goya** makes a valiant attempt at defining the series of visionary paintings, drawings and etchings which the artist produced in this phase.

Coming only a year after Blackburn's book, Pat Barker's latest novel, ***Double vision** (2003), has as its inspiration this same series of late Goya paintings. In this dark and somewhat desolate text Barker's dominant preoccupation with the depredations of war - most notably expounded in her **Regeneration** trilogy - is again her focus. The protagonist, Kate Frobisher, is particularly haunted by the brutality depicted in Goya's **The Third of May 1808** as it seems to echo the dehumanisation her husband - a war photographer - exposed in his work.

After his death in Afghanistan, Stephen, his reporter colleague, comes to live near Kate's house and he, too, is plagued by the horrors he has witnessed in Bosnia. All the characters in this novel, in fact, are in some way affected by the malaise so powerfully epitomised by Goya's late paintings, making this in many ways Barker's bleakest fiction yet.

Another writer who looks at a painter's later years (this time entirely factually) is Elizabeth Prelinger in ***After the scream: the late paintings of Edvard Munch** (2002). A self-indulgent drinker and bon vivant (whose bohemian circle included August Strindberg), Munch's work changed dramatically after a breakdown in 1908. The powerful expressionism of **The scream** gave way for the rest of Munch's life (1863-1944) to a more serene style, and he became what one critic has termed 'a mellow epigone of Matisse'.

Mention of Matisse brings to mind Hilary Spurling's magisterial biography, **The unknown Matisse** (1998) which offers a lively picture of the artist's lean early years. This volume - the first of two - breaks off at an important turning point in Matisse's career in 1908 just as he was beginning to gain recognition. This fact and the authority of Spurling's writing make for impatient anticipation of the second volume. (Studies by a few other eminent women biographers recently drawn to the lives of artists, but not specifically discussed in this article, are listed in the Select bibliography.)

*Top: Painting by Goya (1814) titled **The Third of May 1808** which shows Spanish patriots being shot by French soldiers in Madrid*

*Above: One of Matisse's early works (1909) titled **The Algerian Woman***

Turning again to works of fiction, novelists have often been drawn to the unsung women in the lives of artists. One such person is Hendrickje Stoffels whose face is familiar from many Rembrandt paintings but whose thoughts and feelings have remained obscure. Sylvia Matton has opted to change that and makes Hendrickje the sweet-natured narrator of her novel, **Rembrandt's whore** (2001). Matton projects herself into the persona of the young girl who arrives at Rembrandt's house as a servant and ends as the lover and confidante who helped the artist fill the void left by the death of his wife. But happy as this fourteen-year union was in private, Hendrickje had to endure public ostracism as well as estrangement from the church, privations which Matton describes with considerable power.

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Painting by Vermeer titled ***Girl with a pearl earring***

The passion of Artemisima *which features a painting of St Cecilia by Artemisia Gentileschi, who was known to be the best female painter of the Renaissance*

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In **The music lesson** (1999) Katharine Weber devises an exciting plot to steal a (fictitious) Vermeer and uses the proceeds of its sale for an Irish liberation organisation (also fictitious). The imaginary elements in this tightly-woven story do not detract from the credibility of the idea or the ruthlessness with which it is pursued. Equally compelling is Susan Vreeland's collection of stories, **Girl in hyacinth blue** (2000) which are linked by a Vermeer painting with a tragic history of Nazi persecution and theft.

The theory of Vermeer's use of the camera obscura is discussed within the fictional context of **Girl with a pearl earring** and is much more closely analysed in ***Vermeer's camera** (2002) by Philip Steadman who subtitles his study, 'Uncovering the truth behind the Masterpieces'. This is a topic which has also intrigued David Hockney who some time ago started investigating how the old masters were able to achieve such faithful renderings of their subjects. His findings - magnificently illustrated - form the substance of his book, ***Secret knowledge: rediscovering the lost techniques of the old masters** (2001).

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The book opens with a horrific trial as Artemisia, who has accused an artist friend of her father's of raping her, is tortured by the Inquisition, purportedly to discover whether she is telling the truth. Nothing happens to the man and it is not surprising that, after this painful experience and a hastily arranged marriage, one of Artemisia's favourite subjects is Judith's beheading of Holofernes of which there is a fine example in the Uffizi. Besides Italy, Artemisia worked briefly in England where a self-portrait can be found at Hampton Court. By co-incidence or design this book appeared round about the time that the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York put on a rare exhibition entitled, *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi: Father and daughter painters in Baroque Italy.*

Another little known painter is Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614) whose father was the successful but now almost forgotten artist Prospero Fontana. Caroline P Murphy has researched the period thoroughly and presents the life against the background of sixteenth-century Bologna in ***Lavinia Fontana: a painter and her patrons** (2003). Unlike Vreeland, Murphy does not embellish the verifiable facts with imaginary detail but presents her subject as a highly talented professional whom she defines as 'the first truly successful woman painter'.

In **The birth of Venus** (2003), on the other hand, Sarah Dunant invents her own female painter to explore similar themes. Set in fifteenth-century Florence, the action revolves around Alessandra Cecchi whose ambition it is to become a painter. Alessandra's personal struggle occurs against the background of political turmoil and the growing power of Savonarola who challenges Medici hegemony.

The feminist imperative to draw formerly-neglected women out of the shadows - often the specific shadow of a dominant man - may be behind several recent biographies. Mary Ann Laws, for instances, aims to reassert the talent of photographer Dora Maar. In her sensitive biography, ***Dora Maar: with and without Picasso** (2000) Laws includes some of Maar's stunning Surrealist and commercial prints, reproductions of art works and, most striking of all, her series of photographs tracing the evolution of Picasso's **Guernica**.

Remembered today only for her affair with Picasso and the 'weeping woman' portraits he did of her from 1936 to 1944, Maar devoted herself to a man who left her without a backward glance when he moved on to Francoise Gilot. The nervous breakdown Maar suffered as a result was followed, when she recovered, by withdrawal into isolation and piety, unbroken until her death in 1997 aged 81. This tragic waste of a life and a talent is feelingly recounted by Mary Ann Laws who is eloquent in her appreciation of what Maar achieved and interesting on her sometime circle which included Georges Bataille (her lover before Picasso), the poet Paul Eluard and the artist and film-maker Man Ray.

Also overshadowed by the men in her life was Gwen John, sister of the flamboyant Augustus and for years obsessed by Rodin (from 1904 when, at the age of 27, she

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Also overshadowed by the men in her life was Gwen John, sister of the flamboyant Augustus and for years obsessed by Rodin (from 1904 when, at the age of 27, she

first modelled for the 63-year-old sculptor, to his death in 1917). Sue Rose has now attempted to redress the balance in ***Gwen John: a life** (2001) which draws, among other sources, on unpublished letters in the Rodin archive. Though not an eventful life as Gwen John became something of a recluse, Roe makes a good job of tracing her development as a fine portraitist and painter of interiors from her student days at the Slade through long periods in Paris and Meudon and her sole one-woman show in London in 1926.

A more colourful and extrovert personality is the subject of Laura Claridge's biography, ***Tamara de Lempicka: a life of deco and decadence** (2000). Though this artist is little remembered today, Claridge seeks to restore the Russian-born Lempicka to recognition as 'one of the twentieth-century's most important artists'. And indeed, looking (even in reproduction) at the metallic sweep of her figures it does seem that her work defines a certain moment in modern culture. Claridge chooses **La Belle Rafaela** with its tubular limbs and machine-like surfaces as the pre-eminent example of her 'painterly genius'.

Lempicka's life has many sensational aspects which Claridge has elected to recount in some detail, assuming that by this route she would attract attention and so lead readers on to the art itself. The daughter of Polish-Russian aristocrats, Lempicka married a rich tsarist, Tadeusz Lempicki when she was 21. This was in 1916 and the Bolshevik Revolution soon drove them out of Russia to Paris where, as it happens, she was exposed to many more styles than she would ever have seen in Moscow. Critic Laura Cumming sees **La Belle Rafaela** as an eclectic composite typical of Lempicka's work: 'lighting by Caravaggio, tubism by Fernand Leger, lipstick by Chanel.' Even Lempika's nudes are tubiform, in many ways epitomising the jazz-age and, often, the identification of modern human beings with machines, especially women and cars.

Claridge goes on to enumerate Lempicka's many affairs (with both men and women) and her escape with Baron Kuffner to America in 1939. The luxurious life they led and the pace and excitement of Manhattan suited her temperament exactly - until the advent of Abstract Expressionism. Despite the paucity of written sources, or of living ones, and despite the fact that Lempicka was a selfish and sometimes cruel virago, Claridge makes a lively and readable job of this biography. As she demonstrates, Lempicka's *oeuvre* does deserve another look from our twenty-first-century perspective, though perhaps not quite as many accolades as Claridge likes to give it.

Frances Spalding, the much-respected biographer of Vanessa Bell (1983) and Roger Fry (1980) turned her attention to another member of the Bloomsbury group in ***Gwen Raverat: her friends, family and affections** (2000). Though perhaps hers is not a familiar name today, she was a vital member of both Cambridge and Bloomsbury intellectual and artistic circles. Granddaughter of Charles Darwin, Gwen married the painter Jacques Raverat in 1911, despite her family's suspicions about him. (He died an early and painful death of multiple sclerosis in 1925.)

Gwen Raverat worked principally as a scenery designer, art critic and an illustrator using mainly woodcuts. But though art was her first love, it is through her memoir of her early life, still in print after 50 years, that her name survives. **Period piece: a Cambridge childhood** (1952) conveys a fascinating picture of the Darwin clan with wit and vitality, supplemented by Raverat's own attractive drawings.

Two women whose work is very far from forgotten are the American artist Georgia O'Keeffe, whose 1198-page catalogue raisonné has been compiled by Barbara Buhler Lynes (2000), and the sculptor Barbara Hepworth. It is the centenary of Hepworth's birth this year, commemorated by two major exhibitions of her work: one in York where she was born and the other in St Ives, the Cornish town where she stayed after WWII and which her presence helped to develop into an important centre for modern art. Sally Festing's biography ***Barbara Hepworth** (1995) is aptly subtitled 'A life of forms' and competently charts her life as a sculptor, the marriage which she left to live with artist Ben Nicholson, her rivalry with Henry Moore and her critical reception (notably the support she received from Herbert Read).

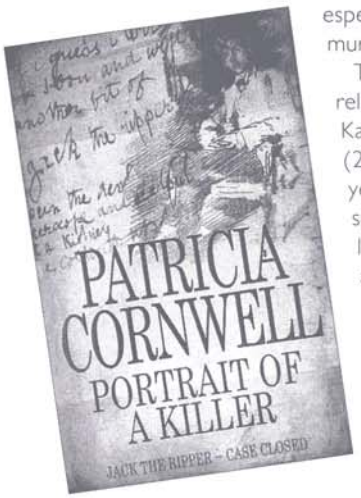
While O'Keeffe and Hepworth have remained in the public eye, Frida Kahlo, the Mexican painter, tends to have been rather neglected - at least outside Mexico - until recently. The publication of a compelling biography by Hayden Herrera - **Frida: a biography of Frida Kahlo** (1998) - initiated a revival of interest, especially after the release of the film **Frida**. The startling resemblance of the two main actors - Salma Hayek and Alfred Molina - to Frida and her husband, Diego Rivera, contributed to the film's success, but more significantly it was the inspired use of Frida's paintings that made it a worthy tribute to an extraordinary artist.

Top: Gwen John: Self-Portrait (c 1900)

Above: Drawing by Gwen Raverat (1952)

Kahlo was extraordinary, too, as a woman who, after polio and a terrible accident when she was eighteen, endured multiple operations and unrelenting pain for the rest of her short life (she was 47 when she died in 1954). The pain that afflicted her is reflected in her work which often has a strongly surrealist flavour, a style she described as follows: 'Surrealism is the magical surprise of finding a lion in a wardrobe where you were sure of finding shirts.'

Besides several coffee-table books, two fictional treatments of Frida Kahlo's life appeared in quick succession. The first, **In the blue house** (2001) by Meaghan Delahunt, concentrates largely on Leon Trotsky's sojourn in Mexico when he and his wife were given sanctuary by Rivera and Kahlo and the use of their Blue House at Coyocán. This is a thoughtful reconstruction in diary form of what Trotsky felt in those last fatal days and of his emotionally charged but brief affair with Frida. Delahunt also touches on Mexican folk myth which played a role in Kahlo's creative vision, especially the 'Judas-maker' who foresees Trotsky's murder in 1940.



Top: Frida Kahlo: Self-portrait holding a letter to Trotsky (1937)

Above: The controversial thriller which claimed that the painter Walter Sickert was Jack the Ripper

The restrained style of Delahunt throws into relief the impassioned, not to say wild, writing of Kate Braverman in ***The incantation of Frida K** (2002). Starting her narration with the 46-year-old Kahlo and working backwards, so to speak, Braverman casts Diego Rivera as the villain - with the 'heart of a butcher' - in what amounts to a feminist nightmare of anguish, matrimonial betrayal and thwarted ambition. Although she does not actually distort many facts, Braverman's reading of Kahlo's life tends to negate her courage, her evident devotion to Rivera and the many happy times they spent together, as well as her spirited resistance to physical capitulation and her unique talent.

On a more general level there seems to be a vogue at present for joint or even multiple biographies. Two of relevance here are **The architect and his wife: a life of Edwin Lutyens** (2002) by Jane Ridley and Sally Emerson's ***Broken bodies** (2001) which is a fictional account of Lord Elgin, his young wife Mary Nesbit and their bitter divorce. Emerson chooses as her framework the popular device of contemporary paralleling earlier action. In this case two young rival scholars are researching Mary's life and eventually fall in love (in much the same way as the modern couple in AS Byatt's **Possession**). The Elgin Marbles are, of course, what gives this novel some gravitas, particularly in the light of present debates about the ethics of retaining the sculptures in the British Museum or returning them to their rightful place on the Parthenon.

Jane Ridley has no need to resort to fiction in her examination of the Lutyens's colourful marriage and the many impressive buildings designed by the architect. The public buildings in Delhi on which Lutyens worked partly with Sir Herbert Baker are probably his most imposing memorial, but he also created the Cenotaph, Queen Mary's Dolls' House and many spectacular country houses.

The 1897 marriage of Edwin Lutyens and Emily Lytton (granddaughter of Bulwer Lytton and daughter of former Viceroy of India, Robert, Earl of Lytton) was a love match which went wrong in an unconventional way. Emily became a Theosophist, a friend of Annie Besant and a surrogate mother to Besant's avatar, Krishnamurti. Her obsessive attachment to the young guru superceded all other emotions and commitments, leaving her husband and five children to their own devices. Though the couple never divorced, they led separate lives, communicating through thousands of letters which were to become the basis for Jane Ridley's absorbing double biography.

A book that warrants notice in this context if only because of its author's powerful links with literature is Anita Brookner's ***Romanticism and its discontents** (2000). Every year since 1981 this former art historian has presented her loyal public with a finely crafted novel, usually on the subject of women coming to terms with the limitations of their lives. In 2000, however, she made an exception and returned to her first love with a book whose title could well have served for one of her fictions. Embracing the entire nineteenth century in this meticulous study, Brookner looks at both the literature and painting of France, isolating her own special heroes from Ingres via Delacroix and Baudelaire to Zola and Huysmans.

Brookner's intense visual awareness is often apparent in her fiction, not least in her recent novel, **The next big thing** (2002) whose protagonist, Julius Hertz, pays frequent, meditative visits to the National Gallery. In fact these meditations are an integral part of the narrative fabric and Hertz's rueful contemplation of Titian's ***Bacchus and Ariadne** exemplifies Brookner at her descriptive best.

As this is a selectively personal rather than an exhaustive article on the subject of literature and the visual arts, I have chosen to end with a few oddities. The first two are very odd books indeed, both published in 2002. Jane Jakeman's **In the kingdom of mists** parallels the frenzy she discerns in Monet's painting during his London sojourn with the frenzy of a murderer committing his crimes in London in 1910. Even more bizarre, perhaps, is thriller writer Patricia Cornwell's theory, expounded in **Portrait of a killer**, that Jack the Ripper was the painter Walter Sickert in whose work she detects 'morbidity, violence and a hatred of women'. Though she presents her evidence with characteristic attention to detail and subtitles it 'Jack the Ripper:

Case Closed', critics disagree and, finding holes in her argument, have unanimously thrown her case out of court.

But to close on a more plausible note, Donald Sassoon's ***Mona Lisa: the history of the world's most famous painting** (2002) is a meditation on the celebrity enjoyed by Leonardo da Vinci's best known, though arguably not finest, painting. The enigma of the smile, the identity of the sitter and the mystery of the picture's magnetism are all part of Sassoon's discussion.

Monica Bohm-Duchen attempts something similar in ***The private life of a masterpiece** (2002) which in fact deals with the creation and reception of not one but several artefacts. The book grew out of a BBC series and includes Michelangelo's **David**, van Gogh's **Sunflowers** and Munch's **The scream**, among others.

Implicit in the interrogation of these artworks are the questions of how they have come to enjoy iconic status and how they have acquired such extravagant value for us. No answers are hazarded and we are left with questions - no less engaging for being unanswerable - first posed earlier in this article and in Nina Bawden's **Circles of deceit**.

Right: The famous painting by Leonardo da Vinci titled ***Mona Lisa***

*NOTE: * Titles not available in Western Cape Provincial Library Service.*

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