

Kimball, Roger. *The Rape of the Masters: How Political Correctness Sabotages Art*. New York: Encounter Books, 2004.

Art historians contextualize art. We shed light on little known facts, elucidate meaning and intent, provide clarity and insight. We also destroy. Many art historians seem bent on dissecting and scrutinizing works of art to the point of having them be unrecognizable, an endeavor often fueled by personal agendas and far-fetched theories. In *The Rape of the Masters*, Roger Kimball has chosen seven relatively well-known works of art that have fallen prey to this destructive trend. The works under discussion in the *The Rape of the Masters* are: *The Quarry (La Curee)*, 1856, by Jean Désiree Gustav Courbet; *Untitled*, 1953, by Mark Rothko; *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, 1882, by John Singer Sargent; *Drunken Silenus*, 1618, by Peter Paul Rubens; *The Gulf Stream*, 1899, by Winslow Homer; *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, 1892, by Paul Gauguin; *A Pair of Shoes*, 1886, by Vincent Van Gogh; and *Las Meninas*, 1656, by Diego Rodriguez Velazquez. Kimball reclaims these works and restores them to their rightful place as examples of superior craftsmanship, artistic brilliance, and, first and foremost, examples of art works from specific times and places in history. Through this reclamation project, Kimball succeeds in demonstrating the dangers, pitfalls, and myopic vision that can hinder one's understanding of art. Many artists, art historians, patrons, and students of art would benefit from reading *The Rape of the Masters*. This is an excellent cautionary tale about how far off track one can really go if allowed to completely dismiss the work of art that is right in front of you in favor of personal agendas, theories, and current trends.

Kimball begins his reclamation by discussing Courbet's *The Quarry*, which depicts a deer strung up to a tree by its hind leg while a man relaxes against a tree. Most observers of *The Quarry* would conclude that Courbet has rendered the conclusion of a successful hunt. According to art historian Michael Fried, however, the work is really about male castration. Fried supports this idea by discussing at length what is *not* seen and what is *not* depicted. Kimball quotes Fried as saying:

For one thing, I am attaching considerable significance to a "side" of the roe deer we cannot see as well as to a bodily organ that isn't actually depicted. For another, the hunter isn't looking at the roe deer but faces in a different direction. But I would counter that we are led to imagine the roe deer's genitals or at any rate to be aware of their existence by the exposure to our view of the roe deer's anus, a metonymy for the rest I would further suggest that, precisely because the roe deer's anus stands for so much we cannot see—not simply the roe deer's genitals and wounded underside but an entire

Reason Papers Vol. 28

virtual face of the painting—such an effect or equivalence or translatability may be taken as indicating that the first, imaginary point of view is more important, and in the end more “real,” than the second.

When, Kimball rightly asks, has the imaginary side become more important than the actual painting? And when should the interpretation of an art historian trump the insights of the actual artist? Kimball properly steers us to Courbet’s correspondence with his students in 1861 where he stated (emphasis Courbet’s):

I also believe that painting is an essentially **concrete** art and can only consist of the representation of **real and existing** objects. It is a completely physical language that has as words all visible objects, and an **abstract** object, invisible and non-existent, is not part of painting’s domain. Imagination in art consists in knowing how to find the most complete expression of an existing object, but never in imagining or in creating the object itself.

By pitting the art historian against the words of the artist, Kimball is able to show to what extremes interpretations of art have gone and how we as art historians are losing sight of, if not outright dismissing, the artist’s original intent. Kimball deftly chronicles how artists such as Rothko, Sargent, Rubens, Homer, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Velazquez have fallen victim to interpretations based on everything from sexism, racism, and feminism to Marxism and Freudianism. Discussions of aesthetics, taste, and quality are rarely employed by many art historians, nor the context in which the work was produced or the influence of patrons. The contrast between what has recently been written about works of art to what the artists intended is often astonishing, sometimes embarrassing, and frequently comical. An interpretation of a Von Gogh painting by Martin Heidegger manages to be all three. As Kimball tells us:

Here we have a painting of a well-used pair of ankle-high leather shoes, half unlaced, standing by themselves on a yellowish-orangish-brown surface. We all know what shoes are. Or do we? Heidegger urges us to look more closely. “The peasant woman wears her shoes in the field Only here are they what they are A pair of peasant shoes,” Heidegger tells us, “and nothing more. And yet—“From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a

Reason Papers Vol. 28

raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil.
Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls
....”

Heidegger goes on, but there is no need for us to follow him. Rather, Kimball suggests that we should follow Gauguin, who, while living with Van Gogh, discussed this very painting with him. According to Gauguin, the shoes are Van Gogh’s, not a peasant’s, and he placed a great deal of sentimental value on the shoes because he wore them during the time in his life when he was a priest and serving a mining community. While serving this community, Van Gogh took charge of nursing back to health a severely injured miner who by all accounts was not supposed to live. This is not as creative as Heidegger’s interpretation, to be sure, but no less interesting, and surely no less important.

However, this seemingly reasonable notion—that the artist is the best interpreter of his or her works—is turned on its head by the statements chosen by Kimball that are attributed to Mark Rothko. Rothko’s *Untitled*, 1953, is a non-representational work of various shades of yellow and black rectangular blocks. Despite the fact that the style is undeniably Abstract, Rothko denied it. He also denied that he was a colorist. In fact, during the height of his artistic production, he is quoted as saying, “Abstract art never interested me; I always painted realistically. My present paintings are realistic.” Kimball’s inclusion of Rothko unfortunately undermines his argument and in essence gives license for art historians to see what they wish. Kimball fails to reconcile Rothko’s personal beliefs about his work with what logic tells us it is, and the reason for this is rather straightforward: It is irreconcilable. Rather than relying so heavily on subjective interpretations, even those of the artist, to make his point, Kimball might well have asked his readers to be guided solely by simple common sense. Indeed, this is in fact the approach he takes most of the time, and for that reason, *The Rape of the Masters* is refreshingly poignant. It is also humorous and inspiring. It may even be cause for hope. Perhaps, upon reading it, art historians will begin to lay down their intellectual brushes and learn to appreciate what is already there.

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