

Mark Roskill. *What is Art History?* London, Thames and Hudson, 1976. 192 pp., 127 illus., \$7.35 (paper)

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provoke discussion and argument among Tibetologists, and, we hope, will lead to further information as to the origin, meaning, and use of this fascinating ritual weapon.

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MARK ROSKILL. *What is Art History?* London, Thames and Hudson, 1976. 192 pp., 127 illus., \$7.35 (paper).

Were this book simply called *Some Classic Problems in the History of Italian Renaissance Painting, and Related Themes*, one could say all kinds of nice things about it — it is soundly researched, urbane in style, insightful. But when the title is *What is Art History?*, with a clear implication that “Art History” means problems in connoisseurship and attribution in the field of Italian Renaissance and other related painting (i.e., Baroque, and, inevitably, Picasso as terminus of the cave-through-Brancacci Chapel-to-Us line of progress in World Civilization), then we are all in trouble.

The author is aware of the problem — a little. “Art,” he informs us on page 182, “is a luxury. It is not one of the basic needs of the human race. The kind of paintings discussed in this book have always appealed to, and been appreciated by, a wealthy and privileged minority.” He further suggests, “If art is a luxury, art history must be a luxury of luxuries — the icing on the very top of the cake!”

Fortunately, there is a lot more to art history than one might guess from a book with this title. There is, to begin with, a huge branch of art history that deals with arts in India, Japan, China, America — about which not one word appears. There is also a mass of literature demonstrating that there and everywhere else in historic times, even in the Italian Renaissance, art was never “a luxury . . . not one of the basic needs of the human race.” That kind of art has only appeared, in fact, roughly from the mid-nineteenth century on. What we call “art” today is not the same kind of activity that we refer to as “art” produced in historic times. Not that it necessarily looks different; not that it involves a different technology — it simply *does* different things in and for society. To think of historic arts in modern categories is like imagining that gardening and golfing are the same kind of activity, because both involve people bending over the ground, stick in hand. Recognizing the difference is why the popular arts are coming to be widely and seriously studied today — not, as this author seems to imply, in some spirit of *noblesse oblige* (“art historians have shown an increased interest in . . . looking at a work of art in a way that assumes an artist’s desire to reach a non-exclusive audience”), but because popular/commercial art *do* in and for *our* society what historic arts did in and for *their* society. Can you imagine Pope Julius II behaving like modern monks at Venice, calling on Michelangelo as they did on Matisse, and saying in effect, “Please, Sir, give me a specimen of your genius; please feel free to express yourself any way you want; I don’t care what you do, just so long as I have a Work of Art from Your Hand.” Frederick Hartt demonstrated in 1950 that Michelangelo did not

invent the Sistine Ceiling iconography himself, but that it was dictated to him by the Papal theologian Marco Vigerio, and that Michelangelo’s greatness consisted in giving new, convincing forms to what the commission required. Orthodox art history has been unbelievably slow in drawing the inevitable conclusion, with its plain implications for a necessary change of accepted attitudes towards artistic activity today.

The fundamental criticism to be made of Roskill’s book, in short, is its assumption that twentieth-century categories of, and attitudes towards, art can be translated *mutatis mutandis* back into earlier times. True, something like the modern idea and definition of art as “creative self-expression” was emerging in Italian Renaissance times. But to imagine that such an attitude was of as primary importance in the Renaissance as it is today, let alone ever the kind of exclusive concern it has become in modern times, is to misread history hopelessly. Furthermore, such a confusion makes art history a useless tool for serious objective study of the past — a disaster, when you consider that for long stretches of the past, arts and artifacts constitute almost all the evidence for the past that has survived. This is a problem that concerns all art historians.

An admirable collection of essays on art history of the Italian Renaissance and related periods, this book is. A definition of “What is Art History” in the 1970s, it is not. It might once have been a definition of What Art History Was, back in the days when “art” consisted of Precious Objects displayed for edification of wealthy connoisseurs, produced for *rentier* dilettantes.

But those days are fading — indeed, it takes no great prophetic gift to predict that such an audience, and the concept of art accompanying it, is headed for as certain extinction as anything in this uncertain world of time and history can be.

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