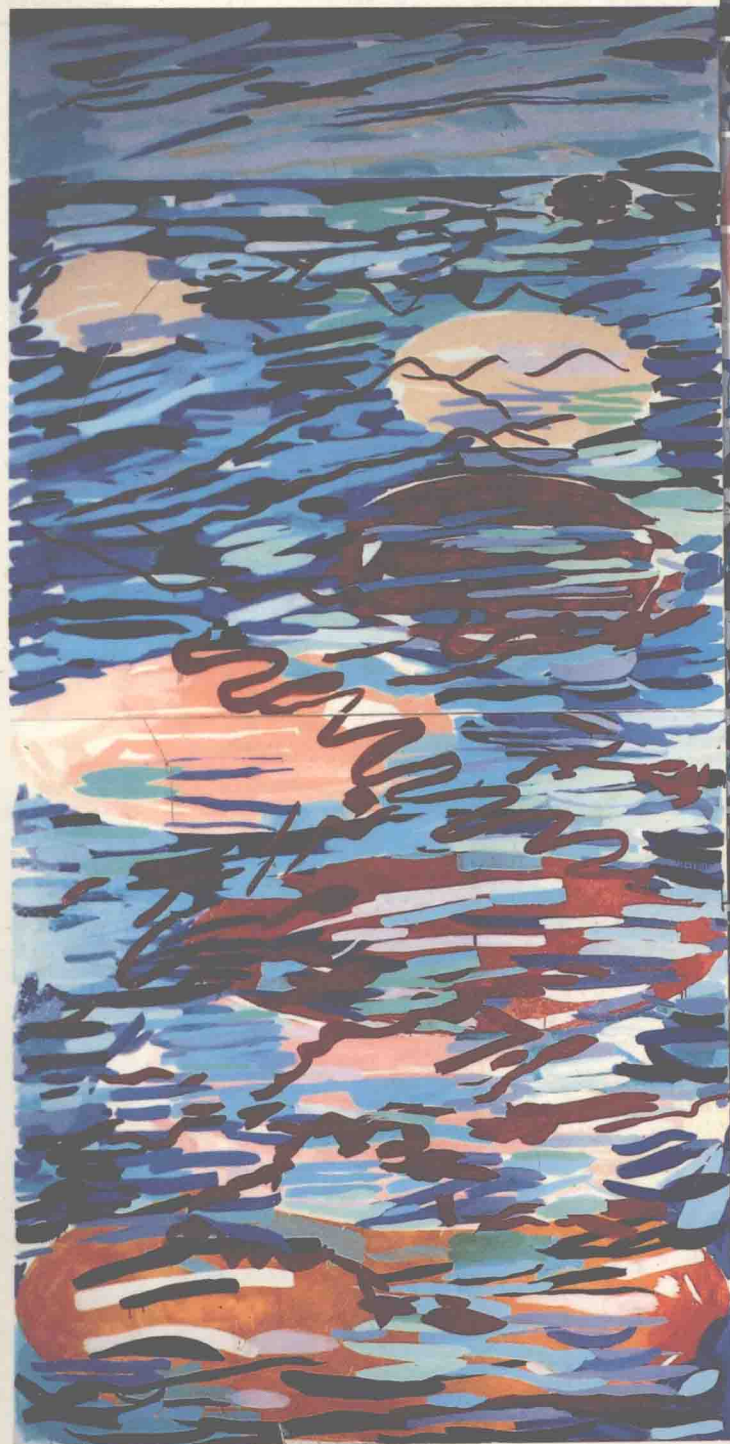


# Understanding Art

Fourth  
Edition



Lois Fichner-Rathus

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fourth edition

Lois Fichner-Rathus  
Trenton State College



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This book is for  
my grandparents, all of whom  
came to Ellis Island—  
in steerage.

*Alfred Stieglitz*  
*The Steerage (1907).*  
*Photograph.*

*Courtesy the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.*

## Preface

*I will always remember when the stars fell down around me and lifted me up above the George Washington Bridge. . .*

—Faith Ringgold

Thus begins Faith Ringgold's joyful monologue, as written on her painted patchwork quilt, *Tar Beach*. Therein is the story of her life and her dreams on a tar-covered Harlem rooftop.

Ringgold's words say much about art and can perhaps lead us on our quest to understand something about art. A textbook on art is not like a textbook in other academic disciplines. Yes, there is a special vocabulary of art. Yes, this vocabulary is woven into a language that speaks of the principles of art. And yes, art has a worthy history. All these things are the subject matter of this textbook. Yet there is another aspect of art that is also very much its subject matter—the wonderment, the mystery, the magic, and the ineffable beauty of art. These aspects of art are captured in Faith Ringgold's words, and they are also found throughout this book.

Everyone wants to understand art, complained Pablo Picasso. “Why not try to understand the song of a bird? Why does one love the night, flowers, everything around one without trying to understand them? But in the case of a painting, people have to understand.”

We shall take a chance in this volume. We shall gamble that we can learn to understand the songs of birds and still love them. We shall gamble that we can dissect the night and the flowers and still be captured by their beauty. We shall gamble that in trying to analyze art, we do not lose sight of its beauty and wonderment.

## WHAT'S NEW IN THIS EDITION

There are two major changes in the fourth edition of *Understanding Art*:

**1. A new feature, “Art in a World of Diversity,”** which focuses on art in the United States by artists of color and women artists.

Since the 1970s, when distinguished art critic Linda Nochlin first posed it, a number of art historians and critics have attempted to grapple most seriously with the bizarre question “Why have there been no great women artists?” and, by extension, “Why have there been no great artists of color?” The questions cannot be answered, of course, because their premises are basically flawed.

There have been, and are, great women artists. There have been, and are, great artists of color. But more importantly, Nochlin's question challenged the historical definition of greatness and the exclusivity with which it has been applied to art. Art history is in some ways the history of exclusive traditions; for example, the

first and most famous teaching volumes in art history featured no works by women.

It would be more appropriate for us to ask, “Why have art historians and critics been blind to the works of women artists?” “Why have art historians and critics been blind to the works of artists of color?” The multicultural “Art in a World of Diversity” features help bring these artists, and their works, to students. Moreover, just as their art is found everywhere in the real world, it is found throughout the body of the text—everywhere.

In this edition of *Understanding Art*, we are not responding to any obligation to familiarize students with the art of women and of artists of color. Instead, we are demonstrating that an art textbook that excludes them, or that fails to give them prominence, misses the very heart of art. Put it another way: We do not introduce a select group of women artists, or a select group of artists of color, just for the sake of including them. Rather, we speak extensively of women artists and artists of color, for if we do not, we do not speak of art.

**2. A splendid new design.** The fourth edition of *Understanding Art* has become a work of art in itself. An art textbook is a museum in paper and ink. In the fourth edition, the museum entitled *Understanding Art* comes fully into its own as a vehicle for browsing, for spending the day, for familiarizing oneself with the splendors of things past and new.

Here, too, is one case where art—the art of textbook design—is more than art for art’s sake. Because the design of the fourth edition captures the beauty of the works and highlights the features of the edition, *Understanding Art* becomes a more vital tool for teaching and learning about art.

## WHAT REMAINS

The fourth edition, like earlier editions, remains a textbook that is intended to work both for students and professors. *Understanding Art* continues to serve as a tool to help organize and enlighten this demanding, often whirlwind-like course. My goal has been to write a book that would do it all: to edify and inform students, and at the same time to keep them engaged, animated, inspired; to meet the desire of instructors for comprehensive exposition.

The fourth edition continues to balance discussions of media and methods with comprehensive coverage of art history—a balancing act that set earlier editions apart from other art appreciation textbooks.

The fourth edition also retains two successful features from earlier editions: “Compare and Contrast . . .” and “A Closer Look” features. Even so, these features have been revitalized, as witnessed right from the beginning in Chapter 1’s “A Closer Look: A Portrait in the Flesh,” which chronicles a performance artist’s

use of cosmetic surgery to create the semblance of women in monuments of the past, including Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* and Botticelli's *Venus*.

## COVERAGE

*Languages like English and French have symbols such as letters or words that are combined according to rules of grammar to create a message. The visual arts have plastic elements that are composed according to principles of unity, balance, and rhythm, and so on.*

—From Chapter 2

**Understanding Art** is comprehensive and balanced in coverage. It communicates the excitement, relevance, and beauty of art by combining stimulating discussions of the language and elements of art with extensive treatment of the history of art. The elements of art—media, methods, content, composition, style—and the purposes of art compose the first part of the book. Chapters 1–9 focus on what we respond to in a work of art and how artists go about their work. It was my intention to show that our lives are enriched not only by drawing, painting, sculpture, and architecture, but also by photography, cinematography, video art, craft, even graphic design.

To understand where we are, “what’s happening,” we must also understand where we have been. To provide such insight, the history of art is covered chronologically in the second part of the book.

Chapter 18, the final part of the book, tours the world of art—beyond Europe and the United States. We examine the art of Africa, the South Pacific, and the Americas. We visit the Islamic art of the Near, Middle, and Far East, Indian art, and the art of China and Japan. We see that artists from diverse periods and cultures use the same language and elements of art to commemorate their experiences, express their religious values, persuade their audiences—even to protest the social order.

## PEDAGOGY AND STYLE

*Art has the power to make us think profoundly, to make us feel deeply. Whether we gaze upon a landscape painting that reminds us of a vacation past, or an abstract work that challenges our grasp of geometry, or a quilt that evokes family ties and traditions, it is almost impossible to truly confront a work and remain unaffected.*

—From Chapter 1

The pedagogy and style of *Understanding Art* were crafted to make students think profoundly, to make them feel deeply. I refused to allow students to experience a course in art appreciation and come away unaffected.

Most students who take art appreciation courses are nonmajors. Some are fulfilling a distribution requirement in the humanities. Their rendezvous with art may be superficial and brief, unless we seize the opportunity to reach them. *Understanding Art* therefore uses pedagogical and stylistic features to engage and enlighten the contemporary broad-based college population:

- **Introduction:** An introductory chapter, “What Is Art?”, discusses the meanings, purposes, and styles of art. Stimulating features such as “A Portrait in the Flesh” and “From Tutankhamen’s Tomb to the *Tomb of the Urban Warrior*” engage them and show them that art is of them and for them.
- **A Closer Look** features: These features motivate students by offering insights into artist’s personalities and enlighten them by delving into various topics in greater depth. Chapter 2’s “On Clothespins, Baseball Bats, and Other Monuments” offers insight into the works of Claes Oldenburg. Chapter 8’s “Let’s Go to the ‘Morphies’” lets students in on some of the secrets of contemporary cinematography and video. Chapter 13’s “On the Mutilation of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*” offers some interesting speculation about the master sculptor of the Renaissance. Chapter 14’s “Caravaggio’s Police Blotter: The Art of Violence” reveals that the artist was as violent as many of his works. Chapter 15’s “Why Did van Gogh Cut Off His Ear?” offers a number of hypotheses, including psychodynamic hypotheses, about why the postimpressionist might have mutilated himself.
- **Compare and Contrast** features: These features show two or more works of art side by side and phrase questions that help students focus on their stylistic and technical similarities and differences. They parallel the time-honored pedagogical technique in which professors compare and contrast slides of works in class.

As an example, Chapter 2’s feature, Compare and Contrast Lieberman’s Photo of Picasso with Van Ness’s *Summer Sunlight*, asks students to compare the ways in which photograph and a painting portray the hot light of summer. Chapter 8’s “Compare and Contrast Jimenez’s *Border Crossing* with Hall’s *The Border*” asks students to consider two very different perspectives on the problem of illegal immigration in the United States. Chapter 12’s “Compare and Contrast Savoldo’s *St. Matthew* with Two Carolingian *St. Matthews*” has students consider stylistic differences among three works on the same subject.
- **Art in a World of Diversity** features: To help bring students into the real multicultural world of art, these features highlight works by artists of color and women. For example, Chapter 3’s “Life, Death, and Dwelling in the Deep

South” highlights an African-American artist’s portrayal of the organic relationship between a woman and her home in South Carolina. Chapter 3’s “Paper Dolls for a Post-Columbian World” shows how a Native-American artist uses biting humor to display some of the “gifts” of European Americans to Native Americans. Chapter 4’s “Donald Duck Meets a Samurai” illustrates the imagery that finds its way into the psyche—and the canvases—of a Japanese-American artist. Chapter 9’s “A Hispanic-American Sculptor Breathes New Life into a Medieval Moral Tale” brings the feeling of contemporary California to the medieval myth of the sin eater.

Diversity features are also found in the history chapters. For example, Chapter 10’s “Roots: Africa, Egypt, and a New Look at Cultural Ancestry” compares the images created by a contemporary African-American artist with those of her possible Egyptian ancestors. Chapter 13’s “Cambios: The Clash of Cultures and the Artistic Fallout” reveals a darker side of the Renaissance—the subjugation of Native American peoples by Europeans.

- **Extracts and Facts about Art:** Extracts from the text have been highlighted at the top of many pages in the text. The extracts have been selected to bring students further into the text, to give them the flavor of a page, of a topic. They offer a quick window on the world of art. At the tops of many pages we also find facts about works of visual art that are related to the sciences, the arts, and the social and political events of the day. These pieces of information—perhaps we can refer to them as “Art Takes”—show that works of art, though they may be unique, are connected with the other arts and events of their times.
- **Glossary:** Key terms are boldfaced in the text and defined in an end-of-book glossary.
- **Style:**

*Art is a powerful tool, and the artist knows this well. It can be used to replicate reality in the finest detail, tricking the eye into perceiving truth in imitation. Artists have reached outward to describe truths about humanity and have reached inward to describe truths about themselves. Sometimes their pursuit has led them to beauty, at other times to shame and outrage. The “ugly truth,” like the beautiful truth, provides commentary on the human condition.*  
—From Chapter 1

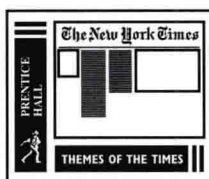
Style is a form of art. Style is also a powerful tool. The style of writing and the explanations of concepts are tailored to stimulate and enlighten students without compromising the complexity of the subject matter. To me, the test of good writing is that it communicate, that it teach, that it inspire. Professors who

have used earlier editions of *Understanding Art* assure me that my goals as an author have been met.

- **The New York Times Supplements Program:** *The New York Times* and Prentice Hall are sponsoring Themes of the Times: a program designed to enhance access to current information of relevance in the classroom.

Through this program, the core subject matter provided in the text is supplemented by a collection of time-sensitive articles from one of the world's most distinguished newspapers, *The New York Times*. These articles demonstrate the vital, ongoing connection between what is learned in the classroom and what is happening in the world around us.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I consider myself fortunate to have studied with a fine group of artists, art historians, and art professionals who helped shape my love of art and my thinking about art throughout my career. Without the broad knowledge, skills, and dedication of these individuals, *Understanding Art* would not have taken its present form and might not have come into being. They include: James S. Ackerman, Wayne V. Andersen, Stanford Anderson, Whitney Chadwick, Judy Chicago, Mojmir Frinta, Michael Graves, George Heard Hamilton, Ann Sutherland Harris, Julius S. Held, Henry A. Millon, Sam Hunter, Konrad Oberhuber, John C. Overbeck, Michael Rinehart, Andrew C. Ritchie, Mark W. Roskill, Theodore Roszak, Miriam Schapiro, George Segal, Joan Snyder, Bernice Steinbaum, and Jack Tworck.

I'm going to say a few words about Bernice Steinbaum of the Steinbaum Krauss Gallery in New York. Bernice has dedicated herself to the support of women artists and artists of color. For many years, while the art world was immersed solely in the work of European and European-American males, Bernice spoke a voice in the wilderness, as it were about the works of women and artists of color too numerous to mention, but among them we find artists such as Beverly Buchanan, Hung Liu, Miriam Schapiro, and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. These are not the artists of the future. They are the artists of today. I thank Bernice for helping bring them into the light.

A number of colleagues provided valuable suggestions and insights at various stages in the development of *Understanding Art*. My sincere gratitude to the following:

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Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Spence, for his patience and help in certain aspects of preparing the manuscript and for helping to make my home an environment conducive to writing. That is, he got up with the baby in the middle of the night as any man should.

—Lois Fichner-Rathus, Short Hills, New Jersey

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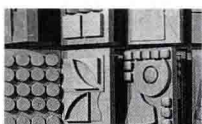
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