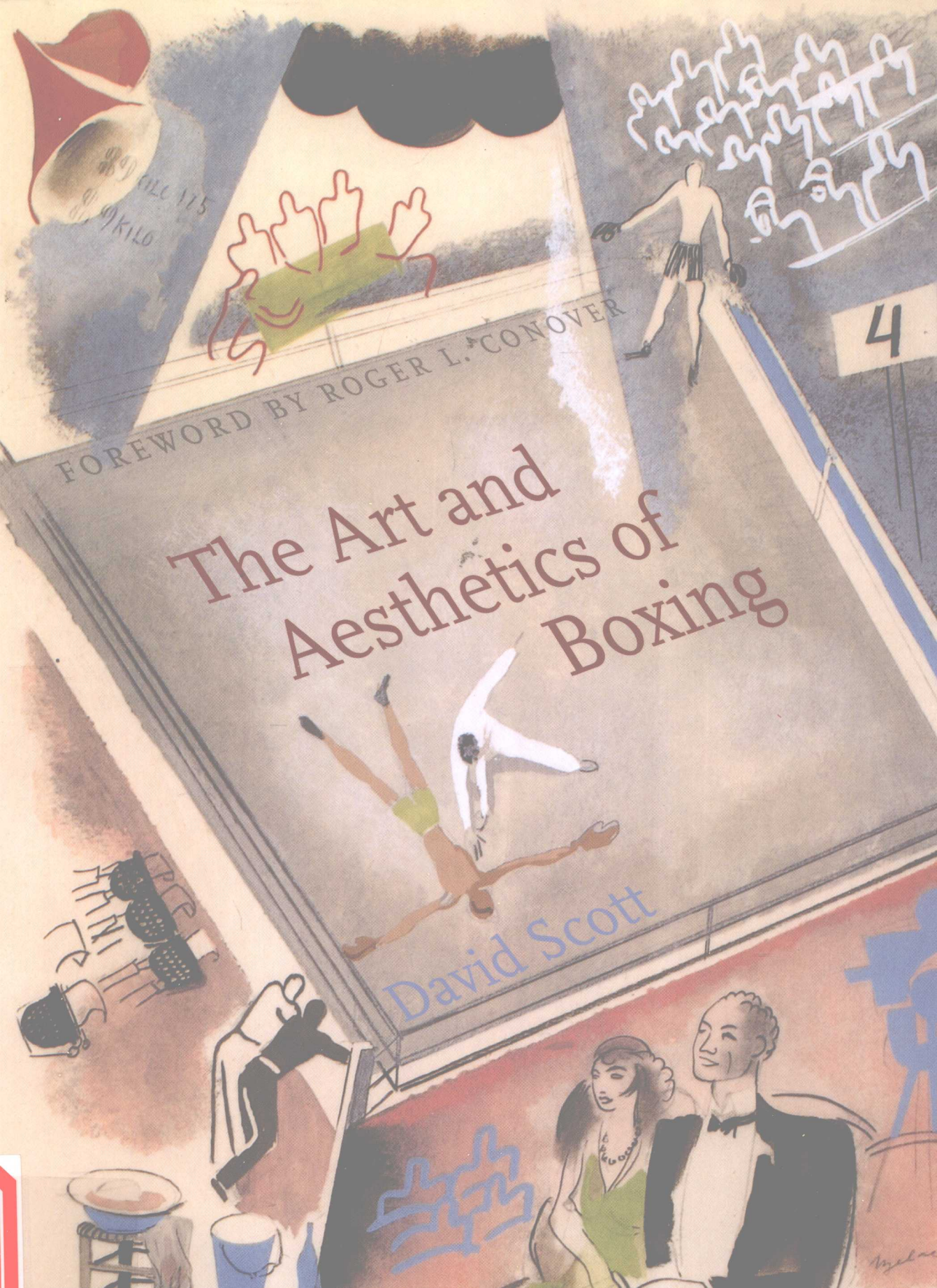
FOREWORD BY ROGER L. CONOVER
The Art and Aesthetics of Boxing
David Scott

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Figure 1. Boxing Club, Trinity College Dublin.
From left to right: Alan Forde, David Scott, Conor Galvin, and Ruaidhrí Breathnach, 2004.
Courtesy Brendan J. Dempsey.

To my formative sparring partners in 2003 and 2004, Alan, Conor, and Ruaidhrí, a token of my appreciation.

To understand the world of boxing you have to explore it personally, to learn the ropes and to live the life of a boxer from the inside. Native understanding is here the necessary condition of an adequate knowledge of the object.

Loïc Wacquant, *Corps et âme*

Boxing tempts writers. It bids them to riff on the contained savagery of the prizefight. It entices them to explore the endeavor in terms of masculinity, race, and class.

James Ellroy, introduction to
F. X. Toole's *Pound for Pound*

Foreword

All sports involve opposition, to a degree. And all games involve play. But in no sport is illusion as essential a feature of opposition and play as in boxing, where blood-smeared combatants insist on embrace, the wounded strut with cocky stances, and crafty prizefighters feign fatigue, luring adversaries into defenseless positions of prey. The fortunes of fighters turn quickly. A boxer who one second looks spent might rebound with a fatal combination the next. A veteran champion can at any moment walk into a jab and be dethroned by an unranked kid. Time and habits take their toll on all of us, but perhaps on boxers more than most.

Some armchair roughnecks go to fights to smell meat. But there was a time when the first whiff you got at a prizefight was of lipstick and smoke, mink and Cadillac. Madonna's bedroom is a boxing hall of fame, wallpapered with photographs of boxers. Muhammad Ali's is in the place of honor. It is signed, "Madonna—we're the greatest!"—a poignant reminder of what time can do to a famous act. Emily Dickinson is an unlikely bedfellow to put with Madonna and Ali, but in her peculiar way, she knew about this business, too. A century before Ali coined his famous slogan "dance like a butterfly, sting like a bee," Dickinson was writing boxers' and divas' fortunes:

Fame is a bee.
It has a song—
It has a sting—
Ah, too, it has a wing.

A good boxer knows how to fake. He shadows, ducks, feints. Sets left; throws right. Clinches and breaks. Circles one way, then reverses. Switch-hits. His body language is plain to see but difficult to read. Some movements are calculated to forbid, others to lure. Let me embrace you that I might hurt you. Difficult lover. But if boxing is one of the most illusory and least verbal

of athletic endeavors, it is arguably the form of physical culture on which the most artistic talent has been spent, the most poetic expression has been generated, and the most theoretical discourse is still being produced, as you are about to learn. I would even claim that boxing has given literature as many great novels as baseball, cinema more classic films than football, and criticism more meaningful essays than tennis. But this has much more to do with boxing inspiring ringside artists and writers than with poets and painters actually going at it. OK, Georges Braque loosened up with a sandbag in the morning, and Picasso is said to have enjoyed boxing—but only until André Derain showed him that the game isn't just about hitting, but getting hit.

David Scott is not only a professor of literature trained in semiotics, he is a light middleweight who has fought on both sides of the Atlantic. You don't have to know this fact to find Scott's book interesting, but it is one of the things that gives the ideas ground and traction. He knows what it means to work with his back to the ropes and to work for six months to go six minutes. The last time we met was at the Dublin University Amateur Boxing Club on the campus of Trinity College, where he trains. It is a plainly honest space, equipped with just what it needs—no pretense or excess. You enter it, and you want to stay. You trust it, like the voice of this book—a book that will nevertheless startle readers who never imagined that an art history or aesthetic theory could be produced by looking at the material culture of boxing, and a book that conciliates between ring theory and ring mechanics, bringing something new to the marriage of cultural criticism, visual analysis, and empirical knowledge. I think it is because David Scott has not only done his scholarly research but he has, in Lord Byron's terms, done time at Jackson's, that this works.

The bedroom of Lord Byron, which probably did not otherwise resemble Madonna's, was also full of boxing images, including a portrait of the poet sparring with his trainer, "Gentleman" John Jackson, in Jackson's Bond Street sparring rooms. Like Scott, Byron knew the difference between men who boxed and those who only talked the talk.

> Who shoot not flying rarely touch a gun
> Will he who swims not to the river run?
> And men unpracticed in exchanging knocks
> Must go to Jackson 'ere they dare to box.

Among writers, the glove and the pen have been worn on the same hand quite often, but again, not as commandingly as Ernest Hemingway and Norman Mailer would want us to believe. For this reason, I find it more interesting to consider boxing as a form of compensation for not writing than writing as a form of identification with boxing. When Barry McGuigan, the former world featherweight champion, was asked why he had become a boxer, he replied, "Because I can't be a poet. I can't tell stories." He took up the next best thing, as it were—boxing: the word made muscle.

All sports are narrative, to a degree. But the way time and space are delimited in boxing make the structure of its narrative particularly transparent. "Each round can be likened to a stanza or chapter, and the conclusion, as in the best narratives, is often in doubt until the closing moments . . . a great fight is a masterpiece of suspense." That's how the late poet and boxer Vernon Scannell once described boxing. "A poetry of physical action," he continued. Boxing is narrative, but it is also poetic; only language that is figurative can contain its contradictions. The first figure of boxing is the ring, "one of the most alluring and perturbing spaces in modern civilization," Scott tells us. But the boxing ring cannot be taken literally. In fact, as anyone who has watched a boxing match knows, the so-called ring is not a ring at all. Boxing takes place within a space whose name is paradoxical, belying a square that is parabolical. Tennis has its court, golf its green, baseball its diamond, hockey its rink, bowling its lane. These are all more or less literal equations for the zones within which these games are played; each of those names evokes an image of a precisely measured site. By that logic, it would seem that we could say that boxing has its site, its ring. But that ring is a simulacrum at best.

The ring of boxing is not only roped, it is troped. The name derives from an old practice, the memory of which conjures an image of fighters encircled by a string of men whooping it up and laying bets in prison yards or factory lots. A human rope of sympathetic spectators forming the approximate edge between boxing and the rest of the world, with a certain amount of awe and give. That is what a rope is. Something that holds, and something that gives, particularly the "elasticated" version which, as Scott explains, led to new tactical procedures of offense and defense in the ring.

But in the earlier, human form of enclosure, the rope of spectators offered

a different kind of torque, shifting with the action as the fighters fell against them like cargo sliding into rails on a sea-tilted deck. There were no "corners" in the days when rings were human, only elbows, chests, and shoulders. If you were part of that line, you didn't rigidly wall the fight, you went with it. Later, the human ring gave way to wooden rails, forming the first "squared circles" of London, until eventually, the rails gave way to the ropes and padded corners we have today. During that same history, the prison yard horn or factory whistle that we might imagine sometimes ended fights was replaced by a new sound: the mechanical bell that now signifies the end of a boxing round.

If the ring is the unit of boxing space, the round is the unit of boxing time, also named after circular gestures, in this case the paths that boxers trace as they stalk their quarry, round and round. And round: the word connotes the human lasso all over again. Indeed, the movements and gestures of boxers tend to be dominated by rounded segments and fragments of circles: uppercuts, swings, hooks, laps, bounces, embraces. And the gear of boxing—its apparel and hardware—also the subject of this book, is similarly comprised of curved forms and partial Os: gloves, posts, gumshields, bells, bags, stools, pads, clocks . . . not to mention the proudly proclaimed circumferences of heads, fists, and waists. As any trainer who has done the wraps knows, the taping of hands before a fight is not only a protective measure, but a hypnotic ritual that induces calm and focus in jittery combatants. As if being embalmed before a possible death, a warrior's palms are encircled in gauze, 'round and 'round, before being sent off to war. So wrapped, boxers' raw hands become padded cylinders, churning in space like enscrolled prayer wheels.

Boxing's essence is an essence derived from circling, from curving motions and rounded notions—from counts, weaves, skips, backpedals, comebacks, and KOs. Boxing always comes back to the ring. The ring that is somehow soft and elliptical even as it is defined by things straight, hard, and statistical. Take the contradictions of boxing away, take the paradox of the ring away, and this book would not exist.

Roger L. Conover

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All translations into English of texts originally in French are by David Scott.

Introduction

Prizefighting was created in anticipation of mass industrialized society, where it has flourished as a sport and, even more startlingly, as an aesthetic.

Gerald Early

Even as boxing exploits it also liberates and, like most sports, it has an aesthetic quality which has intrinsic appeal to those who step into the ring.

John Sugden

The Fight World is the Outside World condensed and refracted.

James Ellroy

Boxing is a sport that elicits strong reactions, whether from the point of view of spectators, commentators, or participants. The latter, who experience the challenge and exhilaration of the sport, as it were, at first hand, tend predictably to be the most enthusiastic partisans, but the sport also has a wide following among nonaficionados. There is also a smaller but nonetheless vocal group who question the moral basis of a sport in which the principal aim, at a professional level at least, is to render another human being unconscious, or who worry about the way the primarily sporting aspect of the game has been cynically perverted and commercialized by its professionalization and mediatization. Two main current conceptions of boxing can be summarized as follows.

One view of boxing sees it as a larger-than-life phenomenon, an epic of potentially tragic dimensions in which professional fighters pit their strength

against each other in a struggle almost to the death. The combatants, often denizens of black, colored, or Hispanic ghettos, find in this rough trade one of the few avenues out of poverty and obscurity and devote their whole energies to perfecting their power to knock out or otherwise seriously incapacitate their opponent and thus achieve victory and celebrity. The involvement of most viewers—it is generally a mass audience—is vicarious, being mediated by television or video, whose voyeuristic lens adds both a distancing and intensifying effect. A devastating demolition of one boxer by the other is the primary aim of a match, the buildup to which is carefully orchestrated by the media in the runup. Large sums of money are generated by the fight, both in terms of the "purses" of the competing boxers and the box office and television rights, most of whose takings go to the small number of promoters who monopolize what is conceived as a kind of industry. This view of boxing as a mediatized fight game of spectacular dimensions dominated by professional heavyweights managed by rapacious impresarios is broadly an American one and has to date been most fully stated (or overstated) by Joyce Carol Oates (1987).

A second view of boxing sees it more as a sport or game, a notable part of whose interest can be found at an amateur level. So while Oates finds it difficult to conceive of boxing as a sport, let alone as a game, other writers, who hold a different conception of boxing, have no problem with either term. It is the skill of the individual as a boxer as much as a fighter that is a center of interest, and the proceedings in a backstreet or college gym (figure 1) can be absorbing as any megastar boxing event broadcast worldwide. The interest is in the interaction of the two opponents, in the resilience, flair, and elegance of their boxing style. This is more a British/Irish or general European view that perhaps sees in boxing one of the seminal sports tracing its European history back at least as far as the Greeks and the Olympic Games. This conception of boxing implies a greater openness to general participation, even if only at a fitness level, with the most enthusiastic viewers of the sport often having some firsthand experience of what is at stake in it. It is a conception that has been articulated across a range of both journalistic and fictional writing on boxing, and most convincingly by Vernon Scannell (1963).

These two views of boxing are not of course exclusive; indeed they complement each other. Boxing, like other sports, is about pushing human capabilities

to their limits, and with such human interest at stake, it is inevitable, especially in a media age like that of today, that the more extreme tendencies of the game should be explored. The alternative view is necessary however as a counter to this, for boxing, despite all the symbolism or neuroses invested in it (to be discussed further in chapter 9), is after all only another sport, one which, though very grueling, is no more so than, say, running or cycling. Boxing is not, as George Foreman claimed, to the approval of Oates (1987, 39), the sport to which all other sports aspire. Sports by definition aspire to fulfill the maximum potential of their own intrinsic possibilities and, in the process, to test the capabilities of their participants to the limits enshrined in the rules of the game, while providing enthralling entertainment for their viewers. In this way each sport has its particular fascination, eliciting a combination of qualities (speed, stamina, dexterity, strength, agility) and offering a unique range of pleasure and interest to viewer and participant. In the case of boxing, the two differing though complementary views of the sport imply a different aesthetic as well as moral conception. Whereas the former more absolutist view implies tragic drama with attendant blood and possibly death, in any case some devastating climax, the latter implies a less bombastic, though still serious, kind of entertainment in which, as in dance, process as much as finale is of primary interest.

For the participant, especially one competing at the amateur level, boxing offers nevertheless an experience of physical and psychological intensity that is perhaps unlike that of any other sport. This intensity is a function of various factors. The first is that it brings the boxer up against the real, the gritty resistance of matter—here encountered in the form of the fist or body of the other boxer—a real that is more devastating not least in that it comes proactively forward to meet you. Concomitantly, you yourself go forward to encounter the real in an aggressive and determined fashion, seeking out the resistance or resilience of the opponent in an equally concerted way. The second factor, one that triggers the complex psychological reverberations inherent to boxing, is that the opponent one faces may be construed to be a version of oneself, someone closely matched in size and weight, a kind of mirror image in which one comes up against oneself in terms not only of psychology or imagination but also of the three-dimensional real. In this way it is possible to probe and to explore, to feel and to fend off of the other, and in the

process, oneself, before finally accepting and embracing it. The concentration of each opponent on the other's eyes is an essential element of this process whereby the will or spirit of the other becomes the key to the physical action. The way that the physical appearance of the sparring partner, often a friend, becomes subtly transformed by the insertion of the gum-shield and the addition of the protective helmet is not the least strange of the metamorphoses that the boxing encounter brings about.[1]

The "high" or adrenaline rush that invariably accompanies the boxing experience (even one of defeat or humiliation) is a function of the confrontation and engagement with the challenge of the real transmogrified in this mysterious fashion. So the glow of acquiescence felt at the end of the encounter in part results from the recognition of the real as other in particular insofar as it is experienced through the agency of another version of oneself. The feeling of fraternal affection at the end of the match or sparring, even for the opponent who has been one's undoing, also follows from this situation of identification with and resistance to the other. In this way, as Scannell says —rubbishing "the commanding officer or headmaster belief that boxing 'makes a man of you'" and arguing that "as a moral therapy . . . boxing is a dead loss"—boxing permits "a man to behave in a way that is beyond and above his normal capacity" (1963, 43). Boxing also permits him to delve into that capacity and to experience it as pure life and energy.

From the spectator's point of view, the dynamics inherent in boxing as outlined above are experienced in more aesthetic terms, the visceral interaction of the two opponents being translated in part into a kind of visual pleasure in the form of dance or choreography. The boxing ring, as three-dimensional picture frame, offers in this way an alluring theater for action in which the two participants, mediated by the flitting white presence of the referee, perform their various, and more or less predictable or ritualistic, actions. Boxing thus becomes from the viewer's perspective a play of matching or near-matching forces which, personified as human beings, through formalized but nonetheless very real confrontation, explore human potential in physical and psychological terms. Although boxing is like theater in the aesthetic pleasure it offers and in its aim to reenact ritual movement, it is closer to the real, and therefore to a more intense level, of excitement. This is because there is real risk in it, both physical and psychological. The blows exchanged

hurt, and ultimately the aim is to knock out or temporarily incapacitate one participant—in other words subdue them to forces of a real that is greater than themselves. The drawing of blood, as in any ancient or primitive sacrificial rite, undoubtedly intensifies the experience for audience and boxers, the inevitability of pain both confirming and ennobling the confrontation with the violence that is inherent in both matter and in human and animal life. Similarly, the audience usually experiences the same feeling of relief and acquiescence at the end of the match as the participants—though the level of intensity of these feelings is variable—as order and civilization are restored after the alluring but dangerous detour through the primitive and the primeval that the boxing match represents or enacts.

My book explores further the function and importance of the aesthetic aspect of boxing. In doing so, it combines the insights of an amateur who has a participatory interest in boxing with those of a critic specializing in the field of signs and images (semiotics) as applied to literature, the visual arts, and to cultural studies in general. Such an approach will, it is hoped, allow certain issues implicit to, but not normally explored within, more conventional approaches to the world of boxing to be drawn more to the forefront.

Like most sports, boxing is a highly formalized and stylized activity. Its particular quality in its modern form is to reconfigure the potentially lethal and anarchic elements that constitute fighting into an organized and legible form of combat. Stance, movement, clothing, rules or codes of conduct, division into fixed-length rounds, and, above all, the boxing ring itself all contribute to a process in which each element, through a system of aestheticization, contributes to the overall visual coherence of the sport. This process is fundamental from the point of view both of the spectator and of the boxer: for the former it provides focus for the gaze and ensures maximum visibility; for the latter it provides a stable environment for action. In exploring further the aesthetics of boxing, this book looks in particular at the contribution of aesthetics to the functional efficiency of the sport and to the clarification of some of the deeper issues at stake in its rigorously organized form. In any human culture, a high degree of formalization or aestheticization invariably signals an important semiotic function: that of drawing attention to an object or action and suggesting a deeper symbolic dimension to it. In other words, aestheticization constitutes a form of marking or

highlighting. It is the aim in the first part of this book to identify and analyze the intrinsic aesthetic dimensions of boxing as a sport, and, in the second and third parts, to explore the degree to which aesthetic responses to boxing, whether from the point of view of artists, writers, or graphic designers, provide special insight into the complexities that enable this sport to exert its continuing fascination.

The first part of the book thus investigates how, in boxing, aesthetic highlighting takes place. The first chapter takes a brief historical glance at the development and evolution of boxing practices in relation to site (the ring), apparel (standardization and use of gloves), and the makeup and motivation of the audience—betting as well as appreciation of the "Sweet Science of Bruising" (Egan 1824) was originally an intrinsic part of the boxing scene and undoubtedly affected the evolution of some of its conventions and practices. A second chapter is devoted to analyzing the stylized stance and movement and the progressive glamorization of the combatant's body, both in its legible muscularity and in its minimal but spectacular adornment. A third chapter focuses on the development of the boxing ring itself and reflects on the dynamics inherent in it from the point of view both of combatant and spectator. The role of the ropes, for example, is central—in both containing the action and in providing the combatants with a means of defense and counterattack. And of course the ropes also express the tensions of the boxing encounter in both physical and psychological terms—to the extent that the symbolism of boxing has become part of general parlance (being "up against the ropes," "boxed into a corner," etc.). In this way the boxing ring both contains and expresses action within what is in effect a three-dimensional picture frame.

The second part of the book shows how various forms of artistic representation of boxing help to highlight its aesthetic and symbolic importance. Boxing is appreciated by large audiences not only as an enthralling sport but also as a metaphor, a focus of profound identification, whether in terms of a situation—a mythical struggle, a binary opposition—or a combatant—a potential hero, a symbol of personal, communal, or racial investment (see Sammons 1990, 31; Piper 1996, 71). The golden age of modern boxing (the first decades of the twentieth century) coincided with an upsurge in representations of the sport in avant-garde painting and literature, to the extent