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# Understanding Art

LOIS FICHNER-RATHUS



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*Trenton State College*

Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 07632

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

FICHER-RATHUS, LOIS

Understanding art.

Includes index.

1. Art appreciation—Study and teaching (Higher)

I. Title.

N345.F45 1986 701'.1 85-16696

ISBN 0-13-935495-6

Editorial/production supervision: Virginia Rubens

Interior and cover design: Lee Cohen

Manufacturing buyer: Ray Keating

Page Layout: Meryl Poweski

Photo research: Joelle Burrows

## For Allyn, Jordan, and Spence

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A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 07632

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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from *The Wall Street Journal*, January 14, 1985, reprinted by permission  
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ISBN 0-13-935495-6 01

PRENTICE-HALL INTERNATIONAL (UK) LIMITED, *London*

PRENTICE-HALL OF AUSTRALIA PTY. LIMITED, *Sydney*

PRENTICE-HALL CANADA INC., *Toronto*

PRENTICE-HALL HISPANOAMERICANA, S.A., *Mexico*

PRENTICE-HALL OF INDIA PRIVATE LIMITED, *New Delhi*

PRENTICE-HALL OF JAPAN, INC., *Tokyo*

PRENTICE-HALL OF SOUTHEAST ASIA PTE. LTD., *Singapore*

EDITORIA PRENTICE-HALL DO BRASIL, LTDA., *Rio de Janeiro*

WHITEHALL BOOKS LIMITED, *Wellington, New Zealand*



# Understanding Art

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Front and back covers and frontispiece:

JOHN SINGER SARGENT, *Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Phelps Stokes* (1897)

Oil on canvas. 84½ x 39¾ (entire work).

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of  
Edith Minturn Phelps Stokes (Mrs. I. N.), 1938.

---

Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes were painted in 1897 by John Singer Sargent, one of the great American society portrait painters of the nineteenth century. When the work was exhibited at the Society for American Artists, it was hailed as one of the “stars” of the show. It inspired one journalist to declare that it “might stand alone as a sample of the painter’s brushwork.” Indeed, the lustily painted masses of beige, black, and white form a dramatic backdrop for superbly rendered details such as Mrs. Stokes’s hand, shown on the back cover. Mr. Stokes wrote that “Sargent was particularly well satisfied with the ‘spiral’ stroke with which he produced the diamond in Edith’s engagement ring, and cautioned me, if the picture were ever varnished, to be sure that the protruding wisp of paint was not injured. Alas! It has been.”

Sargent was a meticulous painter who would go to great lengths to satisfy his artistic sense. Eight renderings of Edith Stokes’s head preceded the one you see on the cover. One might wonder why Sargent, who paid such careful attention to detail, would paint the stern figure of Mr. Stokes so sketchily. In fact, Edith’s husband was only worked into the portrait as an afterthought. The original companion intended for Mrs. Stokes was a Great Dane—but the dog suddenly became unavailable, for reasons that are lost to history.

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# Preface

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Composing *Understanding Art* was one of the most demanding yet rewarding challenges of my career as an educator. Writing a textbook is an enormous task, and not one that I undertook lightly. However, after I had taught for a number of years, *Understanding Art* began to force itself upon me. My approach to teaching art appreciation is to give students a grounding in both the elements of art and the history of art; unfortunately, no available textbook combined elements, media, and art history to my satisfaction.

Furthermore, the available art appreciation textbooks were by and large a bland lot. Although their authors were certainly competent—many were well known in their fields—it seemed that none of them allowed their own enthusiasm for their colorful subject matter to shine through in their writing. I was intrigued by this universal lack of spirit and sought to get to the bottom of it. I spoke with many publishers and many colleagues, and, frankly, no one had the answer. We all agreed that textbooks had to provide the essential information for a successful academic experience, but it turned out that no one could convince me that the cosmic order had decreed that a textbook must be dull. Dullness had apparently become a tradition that was fueled by its own inertia. And so I decided that if I were going to write a text-

book, I would allow it to stimulate and inspire the student, and not just offer information.

---

## COVERAGE

*Understanding Art* is comprehensive and balanced in coverage. It communicates the excitement, relevance, and beauty of art by combining the elements of art with art history. The plastic elements of art and composition constitute the first part of the book. This group of topics discusses what we respond to in a work of art and how artists go about their work. Traditional and contemporary media, materials, and methods receive full treatment. It was my intention to show that our lives are enriched not only by drawing, painting, sculpture, and architecture, but also by cinematography, video, fiber arts, glassware, even advertising design.

We are affected not only by the paintings and sculptures we visit in museums. The carpeting we tread upon, the furniture on which we sit, even the logos at the heads of our business stationery can all have an aesthetic influence on our daily lives. I felt that I must open students' eyes to all this; I must help



them to understand and appreciate the humanly created beauty all about them.

But to understand where we are, we must also understand where we have been. To provide such understanding, the history of art is covered chronologically throughout the second part of the book. It was my goal to demonstrate that artists from all periods and all cultures have used the same elements of art in order to commemorate their experiences, express religious values, protest the social order, decorate their communities, or persuade their audiences. Their works, of course, have taken very different forms. Yet each, when understood, may be seen to have a certain integrity—indeed, a certain necessity—that expresses the artist's time and place and personality.

---

## PEDAGOGY AND STYLE

It is not sufficient, however, for textbooks to be comprehensive and balanced in coverage. They must also meet the students' needs by presenting the subject in an accessible form.

Most students who take art appreciation courses are nonmajors. Some are fulfilling a distributional requirement in the humanities. As such, many of them begin their studies with little or no idea of what art is about. This textbook uses a number of pedagogical and stylistic features to stimulate and enlighten the contemporary broad-based college population:

- **INTRODUCTION:** An introductory chapter called "What Is Art?" discusses the meanings, functions, and styles of art.
- **"DID-YOU-KNOW?" ITEMS:** Each chapter begins with five to ten "Did-You-Know?" questions that are intended to further stimulate student interest and increase students' sense of what is contained within the chapter.
- **"A CLOSER LOOK" AND "THE ARTIST SPEAKS" BOXES:** Boxed highlights in each chapter contain discussions of the methodology of art history, insights into artists' person-

alities, and meaningful quotations from artists and other sources.

- **STYLE:** The style of writing and the explanations of concepts are tailored to communicate to students without compromising the complexity of the subject matter. As I wrote *Understanding Art*, I tried to remain keenly aware of what had come before and what would come ahead, so that I could build concepts logically and gradually. I avoided using difficult technical terms arbitrarily; and, when I did use them, I attempted to explain them clearly.
- **GLOSSARY:** Key terms are boldfaced in the text and defined in an end-of-book glossary. A pronunciation guide and word origins are included for many terms.

Whatever else good writing does, it must also communicate, and I did not subordinate communication to the subject matter—instead, I made every effort to integrate style and subject.

---

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I consider myself fortunate to have studied with a fine group of artists and art historians who helped shape my thinking throughout my undergraduate and graduate careers. Without the broad knowledge, skills, and dedication of these individuals, *Understanding Art* would never have come into being. They include: James S. Ackerman, Wayne V. Andersen, Stanford Anderson, Whitney Chadwick, Charles C. Cunningham, Mojmir Frinta, George Heard Hamilton, Ann Sutherland Harris, Diane U. Headley, Julius S. Held, Henry A. Millon, Sam Hunter, Konrad Oberhuber, John Overbeck, Michael Rinehart, Andrew C. Ritchie, Mark W. Roskill, Theodore Roszak, and Jack Tworckov.

A number of colleagues provided valuable suggestions and insights at various stages in the development of *Understanding Art*. My sincere gratitude to the following: William Allen, Arkansas State University; J. R. Bruyá, Slippery Rock University; William Disbro, Jamestown Community College; Diane Kirkpatrick, University of Michigan; Helen

Pullen, Towson State University; Jim Schietinger, Milliken University; and Mary Stieglitz Witte, formerly of the University of Minnesota.

I acknowledge with pleasure the fine group of publishing professionals at Prentice-Hall. Bud Therien, Senior Editor, is to be credited with bringing the manuscript to Prentice-Hall. His enthusiasm and support also inspired me throughout the developmental process. Virginia Rubens ably navigated the manuscript through the often choppy waters of production. Anita Duncan and Joelle Burrows obtained the hundreds of works that are illustrated in the text. Joelle's tireless efforts, in particular, secured the obscure and moved people on every con-

continent and island. Bob Mony did an extremely sensitive job of copyediting the text, of eliminating discrepancies, and making all the verbal details fit. Meryl Poweski is responsible for the superb page layout. Lee Cohen is to be credited for the splendid design of the text. She skillfully transformed my general ideas into a finished work that provides a suitable frame for the art and concepts contained within it.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Spence, for his patience and for his help in certain aspects of preparing this manuscript. Writing a textbook can be an engulfing experience, and during the past several years he learned what it means to be an author's widower.



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