

Book Reviews

Asia

What's the use of art? Asian visual and material culture in context

Edited by JAN MRÁZEK and MORGAN PITELKA

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This volume is a collection of 11 wide-ranging essays that address the rhetorical question of the title. The central theme of the book is that art is best approached and studied according to socio-cultural context, i.e. its intended uses and functions, rather than formal aesthetic qualities or what Morgan Pitelka refers to as 'modern art history's objectification of art works as autonomously knowable things of universal beauty ...' (p. 2). According to Jan Mrázek, 'Art history urgently needs to learn to be sensitive to other ways of seeing and experiencing the world' (p. 295). With its strongly 'anthropological' approach, this book may be particularly appealing to those in the social sciences and to sympathetic art historians, who may, nonetheless, justifiably take issue with some of the accusations levelled by the editors at art historians and museum curators.

Although coverage includes India, Japan and China, half the book is devoted to Southeast Asia (Cambodia and Indonesia). The book is organised into three categories (Functions, Movements, and Memories), but there is considerable interplay between these themes and the various essays. Most of the essays contain an historiographic component, but the subjects, approaches, and methodologies are diverse and include: the agency and power of objects (Robert DeCaroli on early figural sculpture in South Asia and Janet Hoskins on Sumba textiles); the value of objects based on ritual use and ephemeral materials (Louise Allison Cort's discussion of Japanese earthenware and Richard Davis on Madhubani painting of northern India); and a biographical approach to objects and their commodification (Davis's and Hoskins' essays as well as James Hevia on the biographies of Chinese imperial objects looted from the Summer Palace in Beijing). Several essays analyse the cultural value of objects, often commemorative in nature, that variably encode one or more of the following: religious affiliations and pedigrees (Cynthia Bogel on the transmission of Chinese Buddhist art to Japan and accompanying changes in meaning); political legitimacy (Ashley Thompson's discussion of Angkorian-period royal portraiture and the perpetual lure of Angkor); lineage, identity and related forms of legitimacy (Lene Pedersen's essay on the *keris* in Balinese society); and familial and ancestral relationships and life-cycles (Kaja McGowan on sacred deposits in Balinese sanctuaries).

The generally insightful contributions by the editors that bracket these essays seek to situate the volume both within and in reaction to art historical discourse.

Mrázek, for example, compares television and art history as similar ‘ways of seeing’ that both undermine the meaning and value of Javanese *wayang* (puppet theatre). He argues that, like television, art history’s practices (textbooks, museum displays, etc.) create a disembodied and fragmented vision that ‘annihilates experienced physical distance and place ... the images have new meaning and are seen in new ways and in new contexts ...’ (pp. 274–80). For Mrázek, the encounter between *wayang* and television/art history has resulted primarily in misunderstanding and loss of active engagement with the complete art form and the intended experience.

In spite of their purported interest in the (re-) circulation and (re-) contextualisation of art objects, a problem with the editorial perspective of this book is that these phenomena seem to be of primary interest when they occur beyond the reach of art history and museums, which are seen more as modern corruptions and interruptions of some supposed untainted cultural context rather than as potentially fruitful ways for opening up new contexts and different modes of inquiry. Some of the contributors (e.g. Davis and Hoskins) help maintain a degree of balance by demonstrating how cross-cultural encounters and commodification of art may potentially involve ‘positive’ outcomes for artists and their societies.

The introduction presents a somewhat superficial discussion of form/function and art/craft debates in the context of a simplified characterisation of art history’s traditional obsession with the formal aesthetic qualities of art (ignored, for example, are Alois Riegl and Aby Warburg). Pitelka quite rightly credits scholars of religion with important contributions to the way art is contextualised, but curiously, when it comes to art historians of Asia, refers only to Stanley O’Connor and omits many other scholars who have been actively engaging questions of cultural context for quite some time now: Robert Brown, Craig Clunas, Donald McCallum, Martin Powers and Wu Hung, to name just a few. Insofar as some of these scholars have published on topics included in this volume, they are conspicuous by their absence.

Also conspicuously absent from several of the essays, and sparse in others, are photographs of the objects under discussion. This is particularly problematic in a book that seeks to reorient ways of looking at art, and it underscores, in yet another way, how beholden we all are to the work of other art historians who provide the photographic and analytic documentation of *individual objects* that scholarship like this builds upon ... whether we, often with the benefit of hindsight, agree with their theoretical perspectives or not.

While this book may not be as innovative as the reader is led to believe, it broadens the repertoire of what has generally been studied and taught as art history (e.g. Japanese earthenware that is destroyed after ritual use and perishable ‘raw materials’ in Balinese deposit boxes), and the contributions do indeed enliven the case studies through close attention to cultural context. Each of the essays is a well-crafted introduction to its topic and each constitutes a fruitful ‘way of seeing’ that builds upon and expands our knowledge of Asian art history.

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