

Milton Brown (ed.) with the assistance of Judith H. Lanius, *One Hundred Masterpieces of American Painting from Public Collections in Washington, D.C.* Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983. 240 pp., colour illus., \$63.00 (cloth)

Brian Mangrum

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FIGURE 3. George Romney, *Study for the Shipwreck in 'The Tempest.'* Ottawa, The National Gallery of Canada. Chan, cat. 85.

Richard Cumberland. In my view this essay is too brief to be completely successful.

More satisfactory is Chan's discussion in Part II, where he elaborates his theories concerning the poet's circle and necessarily clarifies his arguments. Focusing (for the first time) on 'the artists who were directly connected with Hayley and who worked in the realm of history painting' (p. 29), he investigates in turn scenes from classical antiquity, literary episodes principally from Dante, Shakespeare and Milton, and contemporary social subjects. Flaxman's illustrations became the best known and the most influential, yet it is Romney who is treated at considerable length, above all, his drawings of *Howard* and Shakespeare's plays. While Chan rightly maintains that few of his paintings exist, with regard to *The Tempest* (Fig. 3) this is partly misleading, for three head fragments, one of them Hayley in the character of Prospero, survive in the Museum and Art Gallery at Bolton. To state that Romney's *Ages of Man* 'emphasizes only two stages in the human cycle' (p. 47) is equally misleading, for his letter (to Hayley) of 12 December 1793 indicates 'the number of the set [to be] twelve.' Finally, in the nineteenth century, Blake and to a lesser extent Stothard are commented on, though Chan nowhere identifies clearly the Hayley circle members.

As an exhibition catalogue, too, the publication reveals a few flaws. More than half of the works in the show are reproduced, integrated in the catalogue essay – an admirable design decision. But the quality of the plates is only adequate. Further, the exhibition list (pp. 81 ff.) lacks any reference to the illustrations and the entries being arranged seemingly at random, catalogue numbers are assigned to the artist rather than the work of art. The entries themselves are not always consistent; cat. 2, for example, is ascribed to Caroline Watson who engraved the work with no mention of Romney, the painter, yet cat. 52 is ascribed to Flaxman with no mention of the engraver, and cat. 98 to 'Blake ... (after Romney).' It is also unfortunate that the typeface chosen is too small for easy readability. Nevertheless, the catalogue ends with two useful appendices, one of Hayley and his writings, the other of artists' biographies (which perhaps would have been more effectively confined to the poet's circle), followed by a selected bibliography (p. 80). If some additions are mentioned here, it is simply as publications contributing further to the issues discussed in this book: Winifred H. Friedman, *Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1976); Peter Tomory, 'A Blake Sketch for Hayley's Ballad "The Lion" and a Connection with Fuseli,' *The Burlington*

Magazine, cxvii (1975), 376-78; Mary Webster, 'Poet Patron of the 18th Century: William Hayley and George Romney,' *Country Life*, CLXIX (1981), 266-67.

Notwithstanding the above criticisms, Chan's catalogue, with its novel approach, constitutes a telling interdisciplinary study, as his exhibition correspondingly served to make visible little-known American and especially Canadian holdings of English art. Too often the nationalistic emphasis on Canadian art can be limiting; the example of The Edmonton Art Gallery should spur (it is hoped) similar institutions to originate European shows of consequence.

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MILTON BROWN (ed.) with the assistance of JUDITH H. LANIUS *One Hundred Masterpieces of American Painting from Public Collections in Washington, D.C.* Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983. 240 pp., colour illus., \$63.00 (cloth).

This book, as we are told in the introduction, grew out of an exhibition of ninety American paintings in Washington collections that was sent to Mexico in 1981. Those who organized the exhibition found it so intriguing that they hoped to have it shown in Washington and elsewhere. Since this could not be done, they contended themselves with translating into English what is, in effect, a modified and expanded version of the catalog (originally published in Spanish) which accompanied the exhibition to Mexico.

As one looks through the reproductions in the volume, one understands their enthusiasm. It is an interesting and impressive array of works arranged in chronological order from Copley's *The Copley Family* (1776-77), to Richard Diebenkorn's #111 (1978). The exhibition must have been stunning. Unfortunately, it is with leafing through the colour reproductions that one's interest in the book ends. The catalog entries accompanying each reproduction as well as the prefatory text, a brief survey of the

history of American painting, do not do the pictures justice and we are left with a 'coffee-table' book of indifferent quality which does little more than inform us, if we needed to be, that the history of American painting is well represented in public collections in Washington, D.C.

I say 'unfortunately' because, contrary to what we are normally taught to assume, 'coffee-table' books need not be trivial, and because the quality and scope of the works included in the volume make one feel that an opportunity to say something interesting and significant about American painting has been unnecessarily missed; that the hasty, seemingly mechanical production of yet another attractive volume for the trade has taken the place of a thoughtful consideration of outstanding works of art and their place in American cultural history.

The brief one or two paragraphs devoted to each painting generally attempt to do too much by providing a thumbnail sketch of the artist's entire career (which, since each artist is represented by only one painting, does not seem especially urgent) in addition to discussing the particular work. This means that the comments on the paintings tend to be vague and inconsequential. The comments are harmless at best and unintentionally funny at worst, as when we are solemnly informed with regard to de Kooning's *Woman, Sag Harbour* that 'The female image has been a major subject in the history of art and de Kooning has made his contribution to that history.' The works would be better served, I should think, by either more or less.

The prefatory text is a well-organized, well-written survey of the history of American painting which summarizes the current 'received' tradition. Such essays – and this one is no exception – tend to be predictable and pedestrian. While there is certainly nothing wrong or controversial in what is said, neither is there anything particularly new, interesting or challenging, no thesis or well-defined viewpoint that a reviewer can get his teeth into. This does not need to be the case. I would prefer and argue for another kind of approach to the sort of task which faced Mr. Brown in this volume, an approach like that which Ernst Kitzinger took when he wrote his justly admired and much reprinted survey of early mediaeval art in the British

Museum. In this essay, Kitzinger was confronted with a limited, somewhat idiosyncratic selection of material, viz., the early mediaeval works belonging to the British Museum, and he used them as his examples. Brown's selection of works was also limited by the terms of the original exhibition, viz., paintings from Washington public collections, but he chooses not say anything about them at all. Rather, his essay deals in generalities only loosely connected to the specific works illustrated in the books and the text often degenerates into mere lists of names of artists associated with a particular group or movement. There may be many and serious objections to Croce's demand that 'the history of poetry do no more than portray the character – that is the genesis and the history – of particular works of art,' but one's sympathy for the notion grows as one ploughs through Brown's essay wondering about what might have been said. In the end, one lays aside the volume just a little puzzled about why it was produced. A good exhibition does not necessarily make a good or even a useful book.

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MARIE WERENSKIOLD *The Concept of Expressionism; Origin and Metamorphoses*, transl. by Ronald Walford. Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1984. xxi + 251 pp., 50 illus. and 8 colour plates, \$42.00 (cloth).

The Modern World, a concept fraught with as many confusing and contradictory interpretations as Expressionism, should be, in actuality, the essential backdrop for this text. For without this postulation, expression as well as self-expression would not have gained the often unquestioned status that allowed it to flourish in art throughout much of the last two centuries.

In 1798, Friederich and August Wilhelm Von Schlegel divided Western history into two components: the Classical or Ancient World distinguished by its formal excellence, and our epoch, beginning in the Middle Ages, marked by a commitment to expression that

revealed an inner life. This concept, intrinsically wed to Romanticism (another lexicographer's nightmare), has consistently manifested itself in the many art movements that have credited artists and their expression with therapeutic and didactic qualities.

It comes, therefore, as a great surprise in a book bearing the promising title of *The Concept of Expressionism; Origin and Metamorphoses*, that little reference is made to the major trends in the history of ideas that paved the way for 20th-century Expressionism. In fact, Werenskiöld shows little interest in the philosophical, thus conceptual, development of Expressionism. Indeed, her well-documented text forces the reader to assess Expressionism independently.

Werenskiöld reveals in the preface to her five chapters that she undertook her scholarship within the framework of Scandinavian art between the years of 1905 to 1925. This research came to fruition in her Master's thesis entitled, *Matisse's Norwegian Pupils: Their apprenticeship and breakthrough 1908-1914* (Oslo, 1972). During this investigation, Werenskiöld explored some puzzling questions. She discovered that art historians were reluctant to recognise Matisse's Norwegian as well as Swedish pupils' work as fulfilling the generally accepted dictates of Expressionism. Subsequently, it is this issue she chose to address.

The resulting text, Werenskiöld's doctoral dissertation, published in 1981 in her native Norwegian, appears here in its English translation, *The Concept of Expressionism; Origin and Metamorphoses*. In the five chapters, Werenskiöld makes the case for the existence of an international Expressionist movement that preceded the German stronghold. She places Matisse at the helm of this movement and credits Roger Fry with the coining of the term.

Werenskiöld is quick to point out that the term was used interchangeably, at first, with Post-Impressionism. In 1910 both critics and artists were beset with the particular problem of how to label a growing body of work that was either an extension of Impressionism or a backlash to it. Symbolists, Primitives, Intimists and Neo-Impressionists found themselves grouped together under the tentative title of Expressionists.