

**Margaret A. Rose, *Marx's Lost Aesthetic: Karl Marx and the Visual Arts*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984. 216 pp., 71 illus., \$57.00 (cloth)**

Mark A. Cheetham

Volume 13, numéro 2, 1986

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073537ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073537ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Cheetham, M. A. (1986). Compte rendu de [Margaret A. Rose, *Marx's Lost Aesthetic: Karl Marx and the Visual Arts*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984. 216 pp., 71 illus., \$57.00 (cloth)]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 13(2), 141–142. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073537ar>

With all due respect to these scholars, I profoundly disagree with their views on this subject (cf. my reviews of the two exhibitions in the *Burlington Magazine*, 123 (1981), pp. 120-5, and *RACAR*, XI (1984), pp. 159-61; see also in *RACAR*, special issue on Van Dyck, Vol. x (1983), my paper, pp. 57-68).

Christopher Brown is certainly consistent in his view. He writes about the *Italian Sketchbook*: 'One of the most striking aspects ... is the virtual absence of drawings after the Antique ... The solitary drawing in the Sketchbook after antique sculpture is of a statue of the philosopher Diogenes, which is now in the Louvre. Van Dyck saw it and sketched it in the Villa Borghese' (pp. 70-71). Brown's statement that the *Diogenes* is the only drawing after antique sculpture in the *Italian Sketchbook* is not quite true. Folio 49 was identified by Adriani as a copy of an elaborately sculptured antique table base. (Evidently there is a similar one in the Vatican Museum). Also, it is interesting to note that when Van Dyck copied the famous antique wall-painting, the *Aldobrandini Wedding* (pl. 60), he paid particular attention to the decorative sculptural details, like the end of the bed, with its turnings and scroll, the large footed bowl at the left, and the font at the right. His interest in these features is adumbrated by several of his pre-Italian works which contain decorative pieces of sculpture *all'antica*. Attention has been drawn to the ewer in the Dulwich *Samson and Delilah*; but there is also the splendid composite capital in the Prado *Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine* (pl. 35), in which there is also depicted a very elaborate column base and plinth, the latter with a Greek key design. (The column base and plinth appear to derive from Rubens' portrait of Peter Peck, Brussels, Museum of Fine Arts, of ca. 1615, but must ultimately come from the antique.) However, the picture painted before Van Dyck went to Italy which shows most clearly the painter's interest in antique decorative sculpture is undoubtedly *The Contenance of Scipio* (pl. 45), now at Christ Church.

The fact that there are only one or two copies after antique sculpture in Van Dyck's *Italian Sketchbook* is not conclusive evidence of the artist's lack of interest in the subject. For one surely would not pretend that the *Italian Sketchbook* contained all the copies made by Van Dyck during his Italian sojourn. Even if one consults Horst

Vey's volumes on Van Dyck's drawings, one finds two further elaborate drawings after antique reliefs, which were in Rome in Van Dyck's time (Vey, n<sup>o</sup> 158, 159); and there are three other drawings which Vey suggests are after antique sculptures, as yet unidentified (n<sup>o</sup> 118, 156 and 157).

By the time Van Dyck returned to Antwerp from Italy his father had died. He commemorated his parent in a large altarpiece of the Crucifixion with Saints Dominic and Catherine (pl. 107). In front of Christ's cross is a large boulder, on which there are a Latin inscription and a putto with an inverted torch. The latter, as Rensselaer Lee noted in 1963, is a motif derived from antique sarcophagi. Since the altarpiece was a personal gift, we may be sure that its motifs and inscription were the painter's choice. They are emphatically not those of someone 'uninterested in classical culture'.

It would be quite wrong to give an entirely negative impression of Christopher Brown's book. There are many good things in this volume. For example, it is very good to see that he praises as a 'magnificent composition' Van Dyck's *Philip, 4th Earl of Pembroke and His Family* (Wilton), which as Brown notes, 'has received a poor critical press' from Cust, and more recently (pp. 198-9). Brown's volume, in addition to surveying Van Dyck's career and *oeuvre*, contains a useful concluding chapter on Van Dyck's influence and reputation. There is a very extensive bibliography (something that cannot be said for many recent publications on Van Dyck).

Moreover, in general, as one expects from this press, the Brown volume is handsomely produced. There is a great range of plates, both black and white and colour, and they include many details, which enable one to see the artist's handling of paint at successive stages of his career. Many of Van Dyck's drawings are illustrated, including a good selection from the *Italian Sketchbook*. There are also very useful comparative illustrations through the various phases of Van Dyck's career, including those of Italian followers, such as Carbone, and English contemporaries or near contemporaries.

Admittedly, some of the black and white illustrations are too dark, others suffer in different ways. Occasionally plates are badly cropped, e.g. *Mary Villiers as St. Agnes* (pl. 191), on all sides; *Sir Kenelm Digby* (pl. 148), on the bot-

tom; *The Aldobrandini Wedding* (pl. 60), on the right. In the early Vienna *Self-portrait* (pl. 2) the artist seems to have caught some dreadful skin disease!

Faulty plates can be blamed on the printers. Yet, ultimately, authorship is all about business. What frustrates the reader of Christopher Brown's *Van Dyck* is not simply aspects of this volume, but also the fact that one knows that its author can do infinitely better than this. His book on Carel Fabritius, and his exhibition catalogues such as *Art in Seventeenth Century Holland* (National Gallery, London, 1976) are ample proof of this. Let us hope that Christopher Brown's new edition of the *Italian Sketchbook* will see the author return to these standards. Meanwhile, sadly and reluctantly, I must state that, eighty-five years after it was published, Sir Lionel Cust's volume still awaits an English replacement.

J. DOUGLAS STEWART  
Queen's University, Kingston

---

MARGARET A. ROSE *Marx's Lost Aesthetic: Karl Marx and the Visual Arts*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984. 216 pp., 71 illus., \$57.00 (cloth).

It is rare to read a book that successfully connects and illuminates movements as seemingly diverse as the Nazarene Brotherhood and Russian Constructivism. But Rose has accomplished just this through her revisionary interpretation of a thread that joins these art historical moments: their connections with Karl Marx. She focuses on Marx's *historical* involvement with the visual arts in order to reassess the use of his authority to support the Socialist Realism which, under Stalin, overthrew the avant-garde experiments of Lissitzky and Tatlin. *Marx's Lost Aesthetic* is not an exercise in contemporary Marxist criticism, but rather an attempt to reclaim Marx's own ideas on art – his 'lost aesthetic' – from the sometimes ahistorical uses to which they have been put.

The Nazarenes dominated the art world of Marx's youth, and his early reactions against their mediaevalizing and Christianizing style were, Rose argues, fundamental to his later aesthetic theories. Influenced by the poet Heinrich Heine, Marx criticized what

he saw as the feudal patronage given to the Nazarene artists under Friedrich Wilhelm IV. The alliance between the monarchy and this group, as well as the anachronism of a mediaeval Christian aesthetic in 19th-century Germany, drew Marx's scorn in his 1842 critique of Christian art. Marx saw Nazarene painting as escapist and transcendent; he sought instead an art that was not 'alienated' from the sensuous and material existence of the people, an art that was not idealist in Hegelian or Christian terms, but which was somehow socially productive. For Rose, the key to Marx's own vision was the utopian philosophy of Saint-Simon, which viewed art and the artist as avant-garde leaders in the battle for social change. The 'productivist' element of art so important to Marx was developed from the Saint-Simonian doctrine that the arts must merge with technology in the modern world and allow artists to participate in the system of production from which they were necessarily excluded in capitalist economies. The first part of Rose's book details Marx's reactions to what had become the official Nazarene taste in art and his elaboration of an alternative. In part two, the divergence of these ideologies is examined through Rose's exploration of the turbulent interaction of Socialist Realism and Constructivism in early 20th-century Russia.

Marx's name has often been used to justify the form of state propaganda that we call Socialist Realism unleashed by Stalin in the 1930s. According to Rose, however, there is very little evidence that Marx's theories on art were sympathetic to this style. On the contrary, his Saint-Simonist ideas accorded closely with the Constructivist aesthetic of Lissitzky and Tatlin. Saint-Simonian socialism had been officially censored in Tzarist Russia up until the 1917 revolution, and its doctrine of cooperation between art and technology was only a distant possibility in what was still largely a pre-industrial country. But perhaps because artists like Lissitzky could develop an artform that embraced engineering, design, architecture and the visual arts right from the beginning without an already industrialized society to change, the Constructivist aesthetic is a pure embodiment of Saint-Simonian ideals. Saint-Simonianism was also a source for the self-consciously avant-garde stance taken by the Constructivists in their attempt to create a secular art that would serve the revolution. Their

works were sanctioned by the new government for some time after the revolution, but with the political purges of the later 1920s went this anti-Realist form. The State, it seems, began to demand more control over what the artists produced. Their productivist techniques were concerned with the characteristically Modernist task of 'showing how' art worked. The State wanted propaganda potential to be able to 'show that', rather than 'how' (as Rose states, these distinctions come from Gilbert Ryle). Lissitzky was in the centre of this dispute over art's rôle. 'It boils down to this,' he said, 'whether art is taking an active part or merely 'reflecting'' (p. 154). Thus Rose points to a contest between a productivist art (Constructivism) that *leads* society and a 'reflectionist' art (Socialist Realism) that merely *mirrors* the State's version of history.

It is ironic – and historically inaccurate – to see Marx as a supporter of the reflectionist view. He hated the realism of the Nazarenes and based his aesthetic alternative on the Saint-Simonism that will be so perfectly realized by Constructivism. *Marx's Lost Aesthetic* forces us to re-think Marx's historical rôle in the development of the State art of the U.S.S.R. Rose's historical examination of the ways in which three artistic styles – Nazarene, Constructivist, Socialist Realist – were involved with Marx's thinking consciously avoids the methodologies of a traditional history of *art*, yet because of its resulting breadth and novelty, her study adds greatly to our understanding of Marx and the artistic styles in which he was implicated.

MARK A. CHEETHAM

*The University of Western Ontario*

---

LEON WHITESON *Modern Canadian Architecture*. Edmonton, Hurtig, 1983. 272 pp., illus., \$50.00 (cloth).

In his Foreword to this book Raymond Moriyama states that 'architecture in Canada has matured, diversified, and achieved a place second to none in the world.' This may be the case. The world pays attention to the works of several Canadian architects. Canadian buildings including Habitat 67 in Montreal, the Toronto Eaton Centre or Robson Square in Vancouver are obligatory references in international

surveys. For the first time since Thomas Fuller headed south, Canadians are undertaking important building projects abroad. Readers of Leon Whiteson's book will be hard-pressed to identify the causes of this new maturity. In his General Introduction to a survey of some 60 projects constructed in the last twenty years, Whiteson declares recent Canadian building to constitute a great achievement but for no discernible reason except that it rises on Canadian soil.

For the author, the proper passport is sufficient guarantee of architectural excellence. Pointing out that Toronto's Royal Bank Plaza by the Webb Zerafa Menkes Housden Partnership stands cheek to jowl with buildings by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, I.M. Pei and Edward D. Stone, he enthuses: 'The only one of the four to be designed by Canadian architects, it is also, *by no chance*, the most imaginative solution to the construction of a massive downtown office tower' (italics mine). Not even Mies van der Rohe can beat the local boys. The reason lies deep in the Canadian 'soul'. While acknowledging that this 'soul' is 'defined too often by negatives of not this, not that', Whiteson characterizes the Canadian architect as 'less sophisticated ... less hip ... less street-smart, less sharp ... not so acutely aware of the agitation of the times.' Their very isolation from the pressures of real life ensures that our Canadian architects will retain what Whiteson calls a 'simplicity' that gives to their work the virtue of 'innocence.' He adduces Moriyama's subtle and knowing Scarborough Civic Centre as 'a fine instance of this cheerful innocence.' Stranded in the by-ways of history, it seems that the 'cheerfully creative' Canadian architect can be all the more humane, caring and blithe.

Nowhere is the comparison more striking than with what Whiteson inevitably identifies as 'our powerful, troubled neighbour to the south.' There 'the neon pop modernism of Las Vegas casinos and California hamburger heavens is offered as symbolology.' There too 'the religion of superstars' reigns supreme. Thus Whiteson feels justified in quoting Moriyama's smug assertion: 'We design and build more scrupulously than the Americans tend to do.' None the less, the author is quick to cite an American journal when it proposes, not surprisingly, that Toronto is nicer than Houston. He clinches his argument with the boast that an American, Jane Jacobs, actually 'chooses to live in Toronto.'