Sister Wendys Story of Painting (Enhanced and Expanded Edition) by Sister Wendy Beckett

For those whose enjoyed the original, the good news is that the new edition of The Story of Painting has grown by more than 300 pages of photographs--magnified close-ups of details from nearly half the 450 paintings in the book. Fauvist paint strokes become mighty slabs; sparkling light on a Dutch still life is revealed as a series of tiny dots; the cheeks of a young man in an Italian Renaissance portrait betray a touch of five oclock shadow. This kind of close looking is seductive, and its an important part of Sister Wendys direct, unpretentious approach to art. As a history of painting, Sister Wendys book has its strong points (works with religious or spiritual themes and those that lend themselves to psychological interpretation) as well as its lapses (a very skimpy discussion of Cubism and inadequate treatment of works from the late 20th century). Even the title is a bit of a misnomer. The painting in question is purely Western; there is nothing here about Indian or Persian
miniatures, or the great tradition of Chinese landscapes. But what Sister Wendy alone offers are vivid, personal interpretations that come from a deep well of emotional sympathy with works of art. Who else would notice the way the bagpiper in The Wedding Feast by Pieter Breughel stares at the porridge with the longing of the truly hungry? Who else would point out how Venus—the older woman pleading with virile Adonis not to go off to war in Titians Venus and Adonis—shows us her superb back and buttocks, beguilingly rounded, full of promise. Rather than portraying Western art as the dutiful production of masterpieces, she revels in the physicality of paint and the variety of human experience these works represent. --Cathy Curtis


How bizarre...
...and yet, how wonderful. Who would have ever thought that a nun going through the museum would have (a) been interesting, (b) been publishable, (c) been television-worthy, or (d) been within the realm of credible imaginings? And yet, here is the proof, on my coffee table. Sister Wendy’s smiling face, next to a scowling Vincent, greets me each day with my morning cocoa.

This is a book to be savoured. It cannot, like the morning cocoa, be rushed and enjoyed. This must take time. Not because the text is dense or confusing—indeed, it is not. It is lively, witty, historical, accessible, all that one could want in a book on art.

But, mostly, it is exquisitely visual in layout. Everything is photographed and reproduced in stunning colour and low-gloss format to make the pages vibrant and durable yet easily seen. Care has gone into the production of this volume. None of the art is reduced to black and white, but rather presented in glorious colour. With over 800 images in under 400 pages, this is a feast for the eyes. Each page is dominated by art, not text. That makes for slow moving, like reading a museum.

Sister Wendy Beckett takes us on an historical tour of painting (in the European theatre of history), beginning with prehistoric cave-art and drawings, leading up to modern and post-modern artists.

She takes representative pieces, such as the Bosch painting of Death and the Miser to illustrate points of colour, detail, composition, and story. Some paintings have complex stories (such as this one), others have simple composition (such as the 'innocently disadvantaged' Mona Lisa) which give endless speculation as to the meaning.

Sister Wendy explores each era of artistic history, listed below in broad categories (there are several subcategories of each), giving history and philosophy as well as major and representative minor works, explaining in detail at least one or two works for each, concentrating on painting, but
also bringing in as relevant sculpture, stained glass, architecture, and other artistic media.

+ Art of the Ancient World
+ Gothic Painting
+ Italian Renaissance
+ Northern Renaissance
+ Baroque and Rococo
+ Neoclassicism and Romanticism
+ The Age of Impressionism
+ Post-Impressionism
+ The Twentieth Century

Sister Wendy does an admirable job at not concentrating exclusively on religious and Christian art (for being a nun), however, given the history of art in Europe, this is a major theme in its own right.

The Epilogue, says Sister Wendy, 'is both an afterword and a foreword: hundreds and thousands of artists come after the disappearance of the 'story line' into the maze of contemporary artistic experience and these same artists may of course, be the forerunners of a new story.' In concluding her volume, she highlights the paintings of Robert Natkin, Joan Mitchell and Albert Herbert, the art of each she hopes will endure.

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