



## The Power of Art

*Simon Schama*

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"Great art has dreadful manners," Simon Schama observes wryly at the start of his epic and explosive exploration of the power, and whole point, of art. "The hushed reverence of the gallery can fool you into believing masterpieces are polite things; visions that soothe, charm and beguile, but actually they are thugs. Merciless and wily, the greatest paintings grab you in a headlock, rough up your composure, and then proceed in short order to re-arrange your sense of reality. . . ."

With the same disarming force, *The Power of Art* propels us on an eye-opening, breathtaking odyssey, zooming in on eight extraordinary masterpieces, from Caravaggio's *David and Goliath* to Picasso's *Guernica*. Jolting us far from the comfort zone of the hushed art gallery, Schama closes in on intense make-or-break turning points in the lives of eight great artists who, under extreme stress, created something unprecedented, altering the course of art forever.

The embattled heroes—Caravaggio, Bernini, Rembrandt, David, Turner, Van Gogh, Picasso and Rothko—each in his own resolute way, faced crisis with steadfast defiance, pitting passion and conviction against scorn and short-sightedness. The masterpieces they created challenged convention, shattered complacency, shifted awareness and changed the way we look at the world.

With vivid storytelling and powerfully evocative descriptive passages, Schama explores the dynamic personalities of the artists and the spirit of the times they lived through, capturing the flamboyant theatre of bourgeois life in Amsterdam, the passion and paranoia of Revolutionary Paris, and the carnage and pathos of Civil War Spain.

Most compelling of all, *The Power of Art* traces the extraordinary evolution of eight "eye-popping" world-class works of art. Created in a bolt of illumination, such works "tell us something about how the world is, how it is to be inside our skins, that no more prosaic source of wisdom can deliver. And when they do that, they answer, irrefutably and majestically, the nagging question of every reluctant art-conscript . . . 'OK, OK, but what's art really for?'"

## The Power of Art Details

Date : Published November 10th 2006 by Ecco (first published January 1st 2006)

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Author : Simon Schama

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# From Reader Review The Power of Art for online ebook

## Uco Library says

Historian Schama certainly has a powerful method of telling a story. He tells the tales of eight different artists Caravaggio, Bernini, Rembrandt, David, Turner, Van Gogh, Picasso and Rothko. The book was written to accompany the television series published by the BBC but it is not necessary to have seen the series to enjoy the book. I read the book several years before watching the series and after watching the series picked up the book again. Reading through it again I could imagine the visual sets that the series provides.

Schama writes about these eight artists and their work focusing on a pivotal piece for each individual. The sections on each artist are engaging and the accompanying illustrations are wonderful. His writing style reads like an action movie with killings, excessive self-mutilation, speech impediments, imprisonment, suicide, and insanity. In his perceptive style, Schama reveals the lives of these artists and the difficult situations they overcame while developing their artistic talents. He simultaneously explores the social, political, and cultural factors which facilitate a greater understanding of what the artists were facing at the time he was creating. He explains what we are looking at and helps us understand the passions at play when the artist undertook his works, putting the person up front rather than the genre.

Most of the artists are individuals I have admired, yet he manages to remove them from the hero status that I assigned to them and turn them into struggling artist with their own demons. This is an engaging book that can be read as a whole or in parts and will be enjoyed by anyone interested in the arts.

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## Abhishek says

Schama has a tendency to harangue...but his sincerity and off-the-cuff humor more than makes up for this. Moreover, when you compare this with the intense passion that went into the making of each painting and artist in this book, you more than get carried in the stride.

Plus the book has Grrreat pictures! :D

I think my favorite were the chapters on David and Caravaggio (potboiling soap-operas both).

I only wish his analysis of the artists was a tad more multi-dimensional...he tends to stick to the same (art is power/power is art) thesis throughout the book, irrespective of the artist or the period.

Overall a book that every art-lover must read and judge for oneself.

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## Kelly says

Look, you either hate Schama or you love him. It just has to be that way- his personality, definite opinions and style are all over his work, and he makes absolutely no apologies for it. I happen to fall into the love it category. Is it "good" history? No. But it's incredibly compelling history- he tells you the kind of story that makes you want to know more about it. It sets out a rich, decadent feast, drama-ramas it up and tells you how it is. I'm more entertained watching his documentaries than I am with most comedians. Whatevs- people like Schama are the reason why history departments get supported, and people like me want to join the

profession. I'll get trained by a different historian, but if I can become half the storyteller he is, I'm all set.

Also- No, don't actually read the book. See the mini-series. The companion book does offer you awesome pictures, but the documentary with his voice, his weird twitchy tics, the dramatic lighting and ridiculous music is the way to go. Get some popcorn and just be ready to be entertained.

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### **Artem Huletski says**

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### **Liz De Coster says**

I took my time with this book (and the BBC-produced DVD series), and it was worth it. The author's strong opinions, whether the reader agrees or disagrees, keeps the reader very much involved. The focus on one or two memorable pieces and the carefully selected historic and biographic details prevent the work from becoming overwhelming.

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### **Gadi says**

I couldn't put it down. One of the most compelling introductions to any subject I've ever read. Now, in museums, in classes, in my room surfen' the net, I find myself remembering the sordid, passionate lives of Caravaggio and Van Gogh and Rothko and David. And Schama portrays each one in such vividly articulated descriptions, from their life to their artwork.

I must say, though, that I despise the Rothko chapter—maybe because I can't stand his art, either. Who gives a shit about red lines on a canvas. And sure, no, I'm not one to criticize modern art—although after reading this book, you'll feel prepared.

If I can choose one thing about this book, it's the way Schama constantly attempts to propel emotions into us, to drive them in like darts, describing each painting as if it was a world within its own, our world, our reality, as if it was burnt onto our eyelids, as if we were blind and needed to know exactly how to feel, how to understand.

Incredible.

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### **Michael says**

If you're like me you took an art history survey in college and then maybe a Euro-pass tour including the Louvre, British Museum, etc., and walked out thinking you knew something about art. That's a bit like

owning a copy of "Beatles 1" and thinking you know the Beatles.

In this companion book to a British TV series, Schama takes you under the skin and the canvas of 10 masters from Caravaggio to 1970s. The book's premise is that certain artworks have the power to elicit emotion and even action. Why is this? Schama actually answers that question.

This is not a primer or a "lives of the artists." Schama assumes you know something (which in my case is literally true--I know something, but not much) about the artists and their times. He fills in plenty on such topics as religious worship in the 17th century, construction of St. Peter's, the French revolution, and the bombing of Guernica.

This really is art criticism at its best. There is little painterly (or sculptor-ly) jargon and lots of living, breathing analysis and history (and even dirt on topics like Bernini's slatternly, adulterous girlfriend, fully realized in a bust that blazes with concupiscence). He never fawns over his subjects while recognizing their flaws and laziness as well as their genius.

Unlike almost other "companion" books, which take a scrapbook approach, this one has real substance and easily stands alone (although my mother tells me the DVD of the series is also excellent). The book is nicely produced and beautifully illustrated with a few well-chosen plates. Schama's descriptive prose is so fine that you easily resist the urge to go to Google images (at least until later) because you can't tear away from this book.

ADDENDUM AUGUST 2012: I was visiting my mother and watched the DVD sections on Caravaggio and Bernini. They were ridiculously overamped (and also felt padded and repetitive). When describing Bernini's "Ecstasy of St Teresa," in which the floating stone nun appears to have a cataclysmic orgasm, Schama appears to have a involuntary wet dream of his own while indulging in some anachronistic purple pornographic prose. Then he has the nerve to add that the statue has inspired quite a lot of bad writing. Case in point.

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## **Amanda says**

I read the chapter on van Gogh and appreciated it as a nice overview of his personality, art and self-destruction. Simon Schama is a good writer and it was interesting to hear his interpretation of different paintings because they so often differed from my own.

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## **Renata says**

My coffee table book that is a go to read whenever I need a dose of art pleasure and a brain break from the mundane. I have been enjoying this book for years, always stimulating and a visual delight as well. Yes, his series is a great entertainment and one can't help but engage in a dialogue w him. But the book is an always available calmer pleasure.

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## **Barry says**

This is a convenient vehicle for Schama, who, as much as he loves art, really likes to argue.

Schama is self-aggrandizing, melodramatic, irritating and truly compelling. He injects his out-size personality into the book and it's better for it.

One can certainly quibble with his choices of which pieces of art best represent turning points of art history (or according to Schama's overinflated prose, history in general) but his choices make for a lively book.

*The Power of Art* is aimed at people like me, someone who doesn't have an art history background. Rather than trying to swamp the reader with loads of facts and dates, Schama concentrates on a few key pieces and spends enough time analyzing them so that the reader gets a flavour of the work and the context and circumstances of the masterpiece.

Is it the best art book ever? Probably not. But it's fun to read.

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## **Trevor says**

A couple of confessions – the most obvious is that I haven't actually read this book. I've seen the documentary, but I'm going to tell you about it anyway. This is a documentary to be seen and not read about. The filming, editing and direction are almost as breathtaking as the artworks discussed. This is documentary film making at its best. You are NEVER spoken down to. He NEVER assumes you will know something only the initiated will know. Schama is a God among men and, a bit like David Attenborough, he could talk about grass growing and I would be in a trance (in fact, I may have listened to Attenborough talking about grass growing, I'm almost certain I must have).

I don't care if there will always be a Britain – as long as there will always be a BBC, that is all I ask.

The other confession I have to make is that I don't do Art – in fact, not even art. I would love to be able to art, but it just isn't one of those things I have any talent for. I look at paintings and photographs and I'm stunned by the idea that someone could think to compose an image in that way, light it just perfectly, use that image as a metaphor in such a way as to twist my lungs out of me so that I can't breathe – but that is not what I do. I am completely incapable of arting and it breaks my heart.

Everyone ought to have a story about why they never became the new Picasso – you know, a 'the day I learnt I would never be heavy-weight champion of the world' story. And this is mine. At high school I was always crap at Art, but one day we were asked to do an 'abstract' painting. I spent the lesson doodling something in the corner of a vast white sheet of paper – something tight-arsed and tiny, as was my want. Anyway, when it was nearly time to pack everything away a friend came over and while he was leaning on the table talking to me – possibly whilst gesticulating so as to explain to me just how crap my painting was – he knocked over my paints and they splashed all over the paper I had been working on. I carefully picked everything up and took it to the sink – let the paint drip off the paper, cleaned the desk and left the paper there to dry off while I went to clean my hands.

When I got back the art teacher was standing over my desk and I was just about to say, “Look, I can explain,” when she said, “Trevor, this is the best work you’ve ever done, look at how free it all is – I’m going to hang this up”. And she did. (New born talent can sustain neither too little nor too much praise – I can’t remember where I heard that, but it is always part of this story) I knew then with utter certainty, as I’ve never known anything else before or since, that art and I would always be star-crossed lovers.

Meeting some of the greatest of artists can be a bit of a shock. Here you are going to get up close and personal with Caravaggio, Bernini, Rembrandt, David, Turner, Van Gogh, Picasso and Rothko. I’m not sure I would like to be stuck beside any of these guys at a dinner party. And not just the ones that topped themselves – all of them are anything but ‘fun guys’. The first couple are certifiable. But God, could they Art.

Generally, each episode looks at a master and we get to see his master work, we get to see it from all angles, so to speak. Take *Guernica* as a case in point – we learn of the fascist bombing of the town, we hear of Picasso saying to some Gestapo scum holding up a postcard image of the painting and asking if Picasso did this piece of degenerate filth. “No, you did.” (If that story isn’t true, it ought to be). We learn of the allegorical stories that most affected Picasso, that fascinated him throughout life and how these became the archetypal images in *Guernica* – the raging bull, the gored horse, the candle against evil.

And then we have the last few moments of this documentary – possibly the most powerful and moving of the entire series – with Colin Powell at a press conference after *justifying* the invasion of Iraq and how they had *Guernica* (a copy, obviously) covered before the press conference following his fatal UN speech. The line apparently said by his media advisors that the painting would be ‘too distracting’ is painfully apt with all of the deepest and most apparent of ironies.

The Rothko is the least impressive episode of this series. Although you do get to see an actor play a very young, and very high camp, Schama marching up to the Tate and being stopped dead by a room full of Rothkos. A friend of mine, just back from Britain, had much the same experience. Well, sans mincing, I hope.

The Van Gogh love of yellow paint is an image that will haunt me. As was the beautifully quick cut to Simon saying something like, “It was much worse” just before this. I watched much of this series in an aspect not too different from Bernini’s *St Teresa*.

This really is a magnificent series – there must be a way of praising it too highly, but I’m sure I haven’t found it just yet.

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## Elizabeth says

Schama is a fantastic writer. He revels in the written word and takes a topic that could so easily bore someone and makes it exciting. Essentially he examines powerhouse artists (Caravaggio, Bernini and others) in this page-turner. If it weren’t so expensive, I’d buy it as a coffee table book.

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## **Joyce says**

As a historian Schama has always excelled at "reading" paintings for the materialist details -- what they can show us about daily life and historicizing fantasy -- but as he gets older he seems to be allowing himself to argue for the role of individualism and belief in the creation of material objects.

Here he could be read as appearing to glamorize the myth of the rebel artist, because he certainly does not shy away from the seamy details of almost every life he recounts. His favored subjects are chockablock with murder, assault, bankruptcy, alcoholism, whoring, and suicide. I was most surprised to learn that marble-pure Bernini had hired someone to slash the face of his mistress; my brother, who recommended this book to me, was blown away by the details of Jean-Louis David's political perfidy and how it was reflected in his changes of subject matter and style.

I think a more mature reading though would be that each artist truly grappled with their own often-treacherous beliefs, invariably in ways that were extremely inconvenient and detrimental to their careers. Over and over we read the story of an artistic genius who works hard for years to reach the pinnacle of success... and then seemingly cannot help himself from self-destructing by pursuing a line of thought that is uncommercial at best. It's striking how often this obsession is of a spiritual nature, although the historical line of deep belief changes from straight damnation through tragic inevitability to political concerns to personal expression -- in line with the mode of modern thought generally.

A note about the book itself: Schama has always had the best production and rights-clearance teams in the biz, because his texts are so beautifully done. I was in a period of not buying books at all, much less \$50 five-pounders on glossy paper... but this thing exemplifies what a BOOK can do for you that a Kindle currently cannot. Worth it for the intelligent selection and quality of the repros alone.

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## **Erik says**

I have only read two of the essays - Bernini and Van Gogh - though Simon Schama is one of those public intellectuals for whom I respect so much. He is bright, intellectually energetic, and a literary stylist. And he is prodigious with his scholarship. He begins each essay with a simple question and then builds the essay around it. I look forward to the release of each of his books.

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## **Carol says**

What great book (and film)! Schama has chosen to focus on many of my favorite artists-- Caravaggio, Bernini, Rembrandt, David, Turner, Van Gogh, Picasso & Rothko. I have previously studied many of the artists in depth except Bernini and Rothko. The film is great and the book excellent -- large color plates, well written. I also learn a great deal about Borromini.

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