

Fascinating 20th Century Art History Book for Critics, Curators, Professors, & Students

Author Claudia Chidester privileges a wide audience with her detailed account of Virginia Fontaine's support for European artists in the post WWII era. While she credits her mother for having the "trusted eye" to appreciate and describe post-modern art (the attribute cited on p. 155), Chidester herself deserves credit for being a "trusted historian" of a unique period in American-European art -- namely, postwar Germany and the art component of the Work Progress Administration in the United States. In addition to excerpts inserted from Virginia's own writings, the volume describes her interactions with (no fewer than) 300 painters, sculptors, poets, dancers, and printmakers. Virginia is the main raconteur of each of these stories, and emerges as a heroine, even as she battled discrimination for being a woman, obstacles to gaining recognition, disapproval by her mother Myrtle, financial challenges, addiction, and infidelity. Chidester forgives Virginia's lackadaisical approach to mothering while praising her talent, perseverance, accomplishments, and important contributions.

Reviews that this writer has read of "Trusted Eye" do an excellent job of covering the major themes of Virginia Hammersmith Fontaine's life. No review, however, stresses that this book successfully integrates adventurous descriptions, alluring photographs, lovely images of paintings, artists' charming cartoons, short biographies, original letters, different text sizes, carefully researched footnotes, a well-constructed index --- and that one of the essays by art expert (Dorothea Schöne) is printed both in the original German and in the English translation, reinforcing the volume's overall authenticity.

The reviews give scant attention to who should consult this book. The answers are -- Art historians, who will appreciate Virginia's perceptions on important and lesser-known German artists. For military historians, the book includes unique insights on the Allied occupation of Germany after 1945. Art curators will be delighted by Virginia's manner of appraising paintings, and art critics could borrow some of her phrases to either praise or disparage paintings and painters. Social historians would have a revealing example of gender discrimination at a leading US university -- and also in the US military. American historians would recognize how McCarthyism damaged the reputations and greatly disrupted the lives of those whom the evil senator unjustly accused of nefarious associations. Art collectors would learn from Virginia's pursuit of direct contacts with artists in their studios (which is also a theme in Chidester's Epilogue). Engravers will be honored by the high status the book attributes to their creativity.

For lefthanded persons like this writer, they will take note of the photos on pages 21, 33, 54, and 142, which suggests that Virginia was not hampered by the emphasis on righthanded orthodoxy prevalent during her youth. And children will be advised not be quick to sell cheaply their deceased parents' original art -- or discard their letters and photographs which are testimony to their families' lives and of their times.

Perhaps most importantly, young art students would see that, even if their original ambitions in art are frustrated, it is possible to still make valued contributions in the field. Selected passages in the book could be required reading in the course syllabi of university professors. All these readers would be informed, entertained and emotionally touched. And many of them would want to keep the book close by for continued consultation and inspiration.

--Peter S. Cleaves, Ph.D. Retired professor University of Texas at Austin, College of Liberal Arts