



Ten of the Best: Books that Introduce Children to Art

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Ten of the Best

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Martin Salisbury chooses his top ten.

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There has been something of an upsurge recently in books designed to introduce children to the visual arts. Perhaps it's just me, but I sense that this is an area that has suffered more than most from bad ideas. Personal *bêtes noires* are the books that claim to encourage visual literacy whilst themselves being poorly designed or aesthetically jarring. Many others feature badly rendered versions of iconic paintings as a vehicle for a narrative 'way in'. Most of these books, like art history generally these days, focus on the social contexts of the paintings, rather than the formal, artistic qualities themselves. It is my firm belief that the very best picture books, on any subject, are themselves the best introduction a child can have to art and design. A bookshelf that contains the likes of Maurice Sendak, Charles Keeping, Bruno Munari and John Burningham cannot fail to visually educate and inspire. There are also many books that introduce children to drawing and making, by far the most important activities to any understanding of art. These again are of variable quality. But I shall restrict myself here to books that aim to introduce children to pictures and how to read them. And my reservations notwithstanding, there are some very good ones!

Snail Trail

Jo Saxton, Frances Lincoln, 978 1 84780 021 3, £11.99 hbk

Jo Saxton's snail takes us through the book, commenting in rhyming couplets on each well-known painting that he encounters on the way. His shell, he tells us, is made up of the colours of one particular painting, but first we must follow his journey, during which he will 'teach us how to look'. After passing Newman, Pollock, Rothko, Picasso and others, we eventually reach Snail's portrait artist, Henri Matisse. Produced to a simple formula, well designed and easy to follow, this book gives us the visual space to look at and enjoy each painting. (3+)

Tell Me A Picture

Quentin Blake, Frances Lincoln in association with The National Gallery, 978 1 84507 687 0, £10.99 pbk

Blake's tenure as the first Children's Laureate had a major impact on the standing of the picture book as an art form. The exhibition at the National Gallery which this book accompanied was groundbreaking in allowing the viewer to explore pictures, unhindered by verbal instruction or preconceptions about the context in which they should be seen. The mixture of gallery paintings and book illustrations displayed alphabetically would never normally be seen together and in the book, as in the gallery, we are simply led through the alphabet from Avercamp to Zwerger by the comments of a group of chatty, curious children. (3+)

Artful Reading

Bob Raczka, Millbrook Press, 978 1 58013 880 2, £7.99 pbk

I like the simplicity of this idea. The book presents a selection of paintings that feature the act of engaging with a book. We have impressionist readers, renaissance readers and cubist readers. Each picture carries a few words of text inviting us to 'read with each other?', 'read while you work?' etc. according to the content of the image. The book is only let down by the visually intrusive and fussy page design. (3+)

Katie and the British Artists

James Mayhew, Orchard, 978 1 84616 737 9, £5.99 pbk

The **Katie** books have been around for nearly 20 years now and can be found in museums and galleries the world over. Mayhew's series has been much imitated but what distinguishes these books from the rest is the painterly sensitivity with which the transition from painting to narrative backdrop is handled. This ninth adventure focuses on paintings by Constable, Gainsborough, Turner and Stubbs. The formula for Katie's entry into the world of each painting is never forced and the author manages to maintain a balance between pastiche and personal visual language through a genuine empathy with the formal qualities of the paintings. (5+)

Look Again!

Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thames & Hudson, 978 0 500 51475 7, £12.95 hbk

Drawing on the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, **Look Again!** invites the reader to explore 15 artworks using the peephole cut-out technique to initially reveal a section of the image from a predominately white page. A coloured band meanders across the page containing text that describes the scene as it appears in the section but invites the reader to turn the page and 'look again!', whereupon the full glory of the image is revealed and commented upon. At the back of the book, details of each painting are listed. What I like about this book is the quality of the design. It doesn't patronise with all-singing-all-dancing graphics. (5+)

Look! Seeing the Light in Art

Gillian Wolfe, Frances Lincoln, 978 1 84780 038 1, £8.99 pbk

The author is the Director of Learning and Public Affairs and Head of Education at the Dulwich Picture Gallery which has done sterling work to break down barriers between 'high' art and narrative or illustrative art. An eclectic selection of paintings is brought together from a wide range of genres on the basis of each one's attention to the issue of light. From the dappled impressionistic light of a Renoir to the heightened contrast of a Frank Hampson Dan Dare frame, each is examined on a facing page through a knowledgeable but unpatronising text. (5+)

Chasing Degas

Eva Montanari, Abrams, 978 0 8109 3878 6, £9.99 hbk

A young dancer has accidentally picked up Monsieur Degas's bag and taken away his paints. She rushes into the Paris streets to find him and in doing so, passes through the familiar turn-of-the-century Parisian street scenes of painters such as Gustave Caillebotte and Claude Monet, encountering Mary Cassatt and Père Tanguy along the way. Eva Montanari's delightful illustrations manage to successfully integrate the work of these artists and her own distinctive stylistic language to create a convincing world and an engaging narrative. (5+)

In the Picture: Get looking! Get thinking!

Lucy Micklethwait, Frances Lincoln, 978 1 84507 636 8, £12.99 hbk

Lucy Micklethwait selects a range of very different paintings from diverse cultures and eras and asks the reader to look closely by showing little disembodied sections and inviting us to find their origin, puzzle like, in the painting. This certainly gets us looking and the thinking aspect is designed to be initiated by a number of questions relating each painting. (5+)

Picasso and the Great Painters

Mila Boutan, Thames & Hudson, 978 0 500 28807 8, £9.99 pbk

The author cleverly uses Picasso's playful inclination to paint his own versions of the works of other artists as a means by which to explore the paintings of Picasso himself and those of Velázquez, El Greco, Van Gogh and many more. The accompanying text is easy to understand (if occasionally a little patronising in tone!) and demonstrates real understanding of the process of painting. (5+)

Lives of the Great Artists

Charlie Ayres, Thames & Hudson, 978 0 500 23853 0, £9.99 hbk

For older children, this book explores the lives of 20 significant artists chronologically from Giotto to Van Gogh. As its title suggests, the book looks at the lives and historical context of the artists rather than examining the paintings themselves in any detail but it is richly illustrated and attractively presented. A wonderful feature of this book is the reproductions of spreads from artists' sketchbooks, always the most revealing and seductive aspects of artists' works. These will perhaps encourage the reader to respond to the little 'why don't you?' panels that suggest various subjects to draw. (8+)

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