



Going by the book: a collector's guide to the best reads on art

With more time our hands to research the arts works that inspire us, we asked some well-known art auctioneers to recommend the best writers on art and collecting



Ros Drinkwater
Fine Arts

The phrase 'cabin fever' entered the lexicon in the 18th century when people were forced to self-isolate during a typhus epidemic. What goes around comes around and we are experiencing a tsunami of advice on how to counter self-isolation.

For mental stimulation, there's nothing to beat a thumping good read. A book I strongly recommend is Robert Hughes's memoir, *Things I Didn't Know*, available on Amazon.

An Australian of Co Roscommon heritage, Hughes began his career in art as a cartoonist for a Sydney publication. When it was bought by Rupert Murdoch who balked at his fee and suggested a cut, Hughes walked, going on to become the 20th century's most applauded art critic.

His light bulb moment came in the 1960s reading Kenneth Tynan's theatre reviews. "His ferocious wit, his genius in dismissal and his obvious commitment to the work he admired; his sense of the moral necessity, not just the entertainment power, of



Portrait of Madame Helleu by Paul César Helleu at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen: the wife of the painter lies in the grass reading a book, possibly about art

theatre. No art critic in the early 60s was writing in this way about old art and I found it thrilling," he said.

The Fatal Shore, Hughes's best selling history of Australia, put him on the map. The book that cemented his reputation was *The Shock of the New*, Art and the Century of Change, hailed as "the best, the most readable and the most provocative account of modern art ever written".

Things I Didn't Know kicks off with a riveting chapter on his near fatal road accident and the ensuing trials and lawsuits before plunging into the past of a charismatic charmer who lived life to the full.

His passion for art comes over as sheer glee on the page. He latched on to the positive with a vengeance, here he is on a 20th-century giant: "Rauschenberg loved opening doors and holding them open

to let others walk through. If the Pop artists could confidently allow themselves to be fixated on media subjects, it was Rauschenberg that showed them the way. If Andy Warhol could base his entire career on a single media device, the photographic silk screen, he got that from Rauschenberg. He was like some crazy millionaire in an American comic strip, the laughing sugar daddy of American modernism, who loved changing lives by handing it all out and giving it all away."

Four books to have in your library

According to Ian Whyte of Whyte's, the most frequently asked question he gets from collectors is: "What four books should I have in my library?"

"I recommend the Theo Snoddy Dictionary of Irish

Artists of the 20th Century; WG Strickland Dictionary of Irish Artists [18th & 19th Centuries]; Robert O'Byrne Dictionary of Living Irish Artists; and Anne Crookshank & Desmond Fitzgerald (The Knight of Glin) Ireland's Painters 1600-1940," he said.

In conversation with Irish art experts, titles by Crookshank and Fitzgerald came up again and again as being influential in their careers.

To Ireland's Painters, James O'Halloran of Adam's added The Painters of Ireland. "These books by two titans of Irish art history are fundamental to our knowledge of the history of Irish art from the 17th century to the mid 20th century," he said. "They are a vital resource to anyone seriously interested in Irish painting and are unlikely to ever be updated to the level achieved by the original authors, both sadly no longer with us."

Another popular choice was E.H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art*, never out of print since it was published 70 years ago, "It's a very accessible introduction to the visual arts. Each chapter is more or less self-contained and one can dip in and out as one likes," said Philip Sheppard of Sheppard's.

Arabella Bishop of Sotheby's describes it as: "The bible for anyone starting out with an interest in the history of art. An easy read and gives a superb overview of the changing styles and the key artists through the centuries."

Bishop's other recommendations include *Great Collectors of our Time: Art Collecting since 1945* by James Stourton. "This is a comprehensive overview of contemporary collecting and collectors worldwide and the changing tastes over the decades. It also covers the shift of the art market epicentres from Europe to America to Asia."

A single book can prompt a change of career direction. My own came when, prior to interviewing the author, I opened and went on to devour *The Story of Painting* by the late Sister Wendy Beckett, the world expert on self-isolation.



Morgan O'Driscoll



James O'Halloran



Kieran Boyle



Arabella Bishop



Philip Sheppard



Ian Whyte

A Carmelite nun, she spent decades devoting her time to prayer in a cold, cramped caravan, only embarking on her wildly successful career writing books and making TV series in order to raise funds for her cash-strapped convent. The world is awash with brilliant art critics, few of them can communicate with their readers and audiences as she did.

The first title to have an impact on furniture and fine art expert James O'Halloran was Michael Levey's *From Giotto to Cézanne*. Published in 1964, "It has its limitations, it is Eurocentric and ignores women artists, but it was of its time. As a student at UCD, it was a mainstay, following me on my tours around the art hotspots of Europe. It effectively ignores the 20th century, but for anyone interested in gaining an understanding of the Old Masters, it is hugely useful reading and I suppose the modern masters are dealt with in spades elsewhere."

The modern masters

Indeed they are. For lovers of abstract art, Morgan O'Driscoll recommends *Resistance and Persistence, Selected Writings* by Sean Scully. "He writes as well as he paints," he said. "Beautifully illustrated, it gives a fascinating insight into his paintings and the man himself. As for the many books on the artist who famously said 'I never wanted to be a painter. I wanted to be a tap dancer', the Daddy has to be the mammoth Andy Warhol - *The Commissioned Magazine Work*, published by Prestel."

Kieran Boyle of Bonham's choices start with *Landscape Painting Now: From Pop Abstraction to New Romanticism*, edited by Todd Bradow with an essay by Barry Schwabsky.

"Published last year, this is the most exciting book I've read recently, it brings landscape painting up to date and features 80 internationally acclaimed artists like David Hockney, Anselm Kiefer and Peter Doig, a personal favourite of mine, Alex Kanevsky, and our own rising star, Ge-

nieve Figgis," he said. "Truly a visual delight. I love this book as a welcome escape and highly recommend it for anyone interested in contemporary painting."

Boyle's second choice is *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet & his Followers* by TJ Clark.

"Books have that wonderful ability to transport us to a particular time and place and TJ Clark's book is an engaging form of time travel that connects the art with Parisian society of the late 19th century. The customs, inhabitants and cafés are vividly brought to life and Clark brings out the relationship between the Impressionists and their engagement with the emerging modernity of the city around them."

"He describes the detail of the paintings of Manet, Degas and others to highlight that emerging modern city and in doing so immerses the reader in Parisian life 100 years ago. Given the current travel re-

strictions, this book is a great virtual trip to Paris."

With Ireland's galleries closed, Boyle also recommends *Treasures of the National Museum of Ireland Irish Antiquities*, by Patrick F. Wallace and Ragnall O'Floinn.

"Books can also fuel wonderful conversations beyond what is contained between the covers and enrich the relationships around us. This is a great book for parents to delve into with their older children particularly at this time and a chance to bond over the special objects that make us the nation/people we are."

For anyone mindful of making a major investment, Ian Whyte recommends "the ultimate guide to Irish art over three millennia: *Introduction to the Art and Architecture of Ireland* published by the Royal Irish Academy."

Philip Sheppard plumps for the Grove dictionary of art (34-volume set), Jane Turner Edition, now available online, for a fee. "Arguably, it is the foremost scholarly authority on all aspects of the visual arts. At the time, it was an expensive addition to my library, it continues to have pride of place and is an indispensable reference work."

"There is also an emotional bibliographic relationship that is not to be ignored: when I glance at the dark green cloth binding and gilt text on the spine of all 34 volumes, each chock-a-block with pure distilled knowledge, I get a strange 'comfort' just knowing that it's there!"

Novice antiques collectors will remember 2020 as the year they had time to engage with the nitty gritty of how to make informed choices when building a collection.

The first step is to get to grips with the lingo - what do the letters EPSN signify? What on earth is an etui? or sadware? And how would you recognise a Dan Day chair?"

All is revealed in *Therle Hughes's pocket-sized A-Z of Collectors' Terms*.

For more intensive research, I know nothing to beat Miller's *Guides*, Judith Miller's excellent books on collecting. Updated every year, they give a lowdown on everything from detailed descriptions and the history of items, to current prices. An absolute gem is *The Antiques Detective* - tips and tricks on how to spot fakes.

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Auction results



Profile by Daniel O'Neill sold for €8,700

March 24: The O'Mahony Collection; Sheppard's online; top lots (hammer price); Profile, Daniel O'Neill €8,700 (€4,000-€6,000); 16/17th-century pair of female saints, Italian School €2,700 (€600-€900); Italian School painting €2,400 (€200-€300); 18th-century Italian School €2,000 (€800-€1,200); 19th-century bronze sculpture €2,000 (€200-€300).
Twitter: @RosDrinkwater



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