Tom Lubbock, critic and illustrator, was the chief art critic of the Independent from 1997 until his death in 2011. He wrote widely on art, books and radio and produced major catalogue essays on Goya, Thomas Bewick and Ian Hamilton Finlay. His illustrations, mainly done in collage, appeared every Saturday on the editorial page of the Independent between 1999 and 2004. His weekly Great Works column, from which these essays are taken, ran between 2005 and 2010.

Here are 50 great essays on paintings by Tom Lubbock, first published in the passionately argued and much-loved Great Works series he wrote weekly for the Independent. Always inventive and authoritative, each piece is devoted to a single painting. This is a book of surprises: Giotto’s Vices as ‘studies in self-destruction’; Hitchcock’s lighting tricks on Suspicion compared to the luminosity of a Zurbarán still life; how the figure in Gwen John’s Girl in a Blue Dress ‘withdraws from life, fading into its surface, pressed like a flower’; Géricault’s Study of Truncated Limbs, as ‘a good painting, simply, of sex’.

This book collects Tom Lubbock’s best writing together for the first time. In it, he explores his thinking about art with great intelligence and humour. Spanning 800 years of western art, this is simply the cleverest, funniest, most moving and most original art book you are likely to see.

With an introduction by Laura Cumming, art critic of the Observer.