Coutts, Marion and Lubbock, Tom

Great Works: 50 Paintings Explored


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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.

His writings are a dramatisation of what it is like to think about art. They never say look at me. They say ‘Look at these things more carefully’.

Tom Lubbock was an original thinker who could always be relied upon to come up with a fresh and independent view. He could make plain the meaning behind even the most complicated art.

Sir Nicholas Serota

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Tom Sutcliffe

How does the flatness of Mickey Mouse’s ears illuminate the ‘non-speciic bodies’ of Klimt’s Water Nymphs? Why was Vuillard’s genius confined to the decade when he worked at home? What was it that made Ingres such an exciting weirdo? Germolene, sticking plaster, marshmallows, prune cocktail, pork pate and sausage meat: how many other ways could Philip Guston find to paint pink?

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 lower’; 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.