



The Art of Arts: Rediscovering Painting

Anita Albus

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There was a time, five hundred years ago, when science was regarded as an art, and art as a science. And in the contest between the senses, the ear, through which we had previously received all knowledge and the word of God, was conquered by the eye, which would henceforth be king. A new breed of painters aimed to reconcile the world of the senses with that of the mind, and their goal was to conceal themselves in the details and vanish away, like God. A new way of perceiving was born.

Anita Albus describes the birth and evolution of trompe-l'oeil painting in oils in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, focusing her attention on works by northern European artists—both major and minor. As a scholar, she stands in the tradition of Panofsky; as a painter, she is able to see things others have not yet perceived; as a storyteller, she skillfully describes abstract notions in a vivid and exciting way. Like the multilayered technique of the Old Masters, her method assumes an ability to distinguish between the different levels, as well as a talent for synthesizing them.

The first part of the book is devoted to the visibility of the invisible in the art of Jan van Eyck—his visual effects, perspective, artistic technique, and philosophy. The second and third parts are taken up with descriptions of the genres of "forest landscape," "still life," and "forest floor." In the midst of butterflies, bumblebees, and dragonflies, Vladimir Nabokov emerges as final witness to the survival in literature of all that was condemned to vanish from the fine arts. After a glimpse into the continuing presence of the past and some conjectures as to the future, the book's final part throws fresh light on the colored grains of the hand-ground pigments that were lost when artists' materials began to be commercially manufactured in the nineteenth century.

The Art of Arts is thus both a dazzling cultural history and the story of two explosive inventions: the so-called third dimension of space through perspective, and the shockingly vivid colors of revolutionary oil paints. Albus makes abundantly clear how, taken together, these breakthroughs not only created a new art, but altered forever our perception of the world.

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