



Vision, Reflection, and Desire in Western Painting (Bettie Allison Rand Lectures in Art History)

By David Summers



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Spanning more than 2,500 years in the history of art, *Vision, Reflection, and Desire in Western Painting* demonstrates how the rise and diffusion of the science of optics in ancient Greece and the Mediterranean world correlated to pictorial illusion in the development of Western painting from Hellenistic Greece to the present. Using examples from the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, David Summers argues that scene-painting (architectural backdrops) and shadow-painting (in which forms are modeled or shown as if in relation to a source of light) not only evolved in close association with geometric optics toward the end of the fifth century B.C.E., but also contributed substantially to the foundations of the new science.

The spread of understanding of how light is transmitted, reflected, and refracted is evident in the works of artists such as Brunelleschi, van Eyck, Alberti, and Leonardo. The interplay between optics and painting that influenced the course of Western art, Summers says, persisted as a framework for the realism of Caravaggio, Rembrandt, and Goya and continues today in modern photography and film.

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Editorial Review

Review

It is [Summer's] ability to see through the superficial relationships that bind optics, perspective and Western painting to the threads that weave them together into meaningful structures that accounts for this book's great contribution to scholarship.--*The Burlington Magazine*

A valuable addition to a subject often treated in starkly mathematical terms.--*Isis*

Looks beyond the merely geometric aspects of sight to the higher-order activities of vision and the role of memory. . . . Recommended.--*CHOICE*

An insightful investigation of the intersections of painting, optics, and perception. . . . The general thrust of the book, with its emphasis on the historical and even human basis for perspective, offers an important answer to critiques which treat it as conventional or arbitrary.--*Renaissance Quarterly*

Review

This fine book celebrates the extraordinary influence that the ancient and medieval science of human vision--optics--had upon Western culture, not only on Renaissance visual arts, but also on philosophy, religion, and politics. Its message is a needed antidote to the current trend among some art historians to denigrate Renaissance perspective as an agent of Western cultural 'colonialism' and even antithetical to true artistic expression.--Samuel Y. Edgerton, Williams College

Summers's fresh approaches to pictorial representation, perspective, and optics are a magisterial achievement, opening up numerous new avenues of analysis. Written fluently and elegantly, this book is a major contribution to the field.--Thomas Frangenberg, University of Leicester

About the Author

David Summers is William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Art History at the University of Virginia. He is author of three previous books, including *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*.

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