

BOOKS

The First Picture Show

THE ROMANTIC REBELLION:

ROMANTIC VS. CLASSIC ART

by Kenneth Clark

Harper & Row, 366 pp., \$15.00

Reviewed by Anne Hollander

Kenneth Clark is probably the best-known art historian on both sides of the Atlantic, because of the very successful television series called "Civilisation," in which he appeared as the apostle of culture to the multitudes. Among scholars, however, he is not invariably in the first rank, since his books are actually informed essays rather than works of rigorous scholarship. Of all his works, the best is probably *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, which is an admirably organized, sustained original study. *Landscape Into Art*, another valuable and original book, is a group of lectures given by Clark while he held the Slade Professorship at Oxford from 1946 to 1950. "The Slade Professorship," he says, "is a peculiar institution, very different in intention from the professorships of art history which are usual in the universities of America and the Continent. . . . Its founders . . . did not intend that the professor should give his pupils a detailed survey of the history of art, or should make them proficient in such branches of the subject as stylistic criticism and iconography. They intended, in Ruskin's words, that he should 'make our English youth care somewhat for the arts.'" This is still manifestly Lord Clark's purpose in the present volume.

The title *The Romantic Rebellion* belies the nature of the book, by indicating an analysis or even a chronicle of a fairly well-defined historical movement. Instead, it is a series of close looks at ten very distinctively original artists working during the momentous period between 1760 and 1860, and at three more who can be said to continue the romantic and

classic traditions almost down to the very end of the nineteenth century. Like the celebrated *Civilisation*, this book is a collection of essays that were made out of lectures and into television programs before finally being printed under one title. There is no central thesis or unified historical vision in this study, which is, rather, a few notions about art and artists clarified by a look at a great many pictures.

Lord Clark is wonderful at doing this publicly and at showing how looking at works of art may be a lifelong, self-renewing pleasure, forever offering up new material—new connections, new insights, new attitudes—from old, familiar things. Without felicity and an economy of expression (a happy blend of semicol-loquial terms and a brisk use of the vocabulary of traditional learning), this kind of criticism becomes pretentious and unpalatable burbling. But when Lord Clark, with august authority and expertise, states flatly that he finds something boring, he seems to invite everyone to express his own most immediate feelings about any work of art, and thus to do a proper kind of honor at least to the directness of the artist's original effort. In the next breath, Clark is confessing to new discoveries about something he once failed to appreciate, and so we are encouraged to follow that example as well. When he lectures, we are inclined to listen the more respectfully, since he allows not only for his own prejudices but also for any of ours.

During the period covered by this book, paintings often had an exciting public existence quite different from the one they experience today. Long before movies, people loved to see fantasies brought to life and popular attitudes dramatically depicted. In Paris and London, eager crowds would stand in line and pay to see a single huge canvas by Benjamin Haydon or Jacques Louis David, and they would often respond to it with strong emotion, participating actively in the event by strewing flowers or shaking their fists or fainting. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, artists, whether careful classicists or agitated romantics, were all committed to the concept of subject matter, and it is this commitment that wedded the two opposing movements. The public might be satisfied, outraged, or uplifted by an artist, but it could always know what the painting was about. Among all the artists Sir Kenneth deals with, only Turner privately indulged in pure color and painted

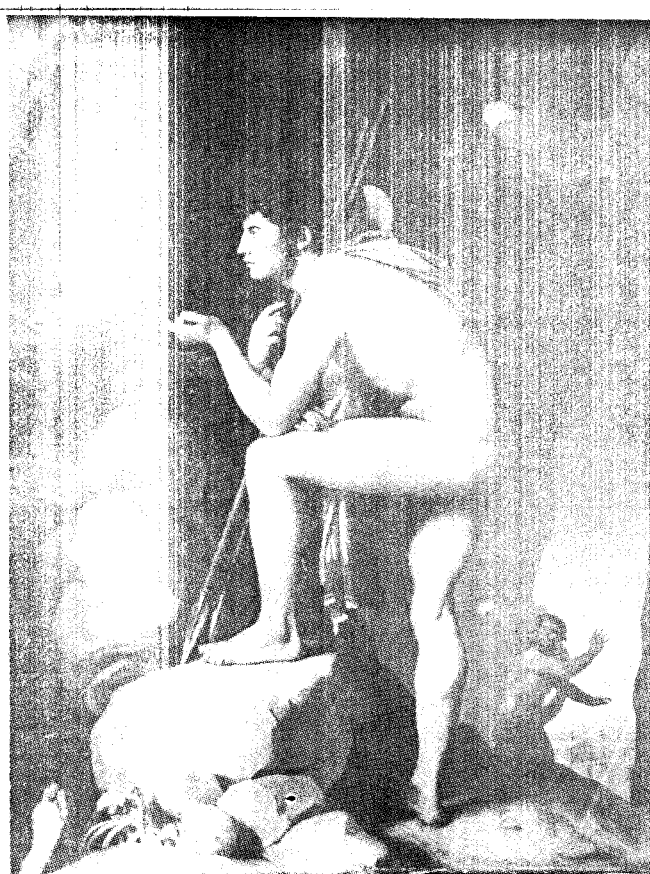
many canvases for his eyes alone, the way a modern artist might do; yet with his accumulated prestige, he could even successfully exhibit some of his incomprehensibly misty compositions, as long as they were identified and titled. Some of them, in fact, had very long specific titles about the time and place in which they were done, so as to show how intimately the artist had involved himself with the circumstances he was recording—often dangerous and dramatic ones, such as storm and fire.

TURNER IS A CENTRAL FIGURE in this book, which is written in a rather old-fashioned English tradition of art criticism, concentrating on French painting, proudly giving due space to the great English eccentrics—Blake, Fuseli, Turner, Constable—and completely ignoring the vast German romantic movement, with its echoes in America. In England, Turner did make an unprecedented poetic leap out of the whole conventional world of English topographical watercolors and Claude-like classical landscapes, with which he successfully began his long, extraordinary career, and into the most astounding painterly freedom, which antedated the impressionists and Whistler by more than a quarter century. Hazlitt called his glittering, swirling pictures "portraits of nothing, and very like." The English are right to be proud of him; and yet there is such a vivid resemblance between his *Hero and Leander*, for example, and one or two works by his American contemporary Thomas Cole that it seems wrong not to deal with Cole at all. Caspar David Friedrich is mentioned once but is not discussed.

Self-aware romanticism in the art of this period is distinguished, says Clark, by its concentration on releasing the emotion of fear, with the aid of a whole



Fuseli—"Plagued by persistent images."



Photographs: From the book.

Goya—"His talent fostered early by the reigning powers."

Ingres—"Arch-classicist and Emperor of Art in France."

system of romantic iconography. As a useful date for the beginning of this impulse in European aesthetic consciousness, he gives 1755, the year of the famous Lisbon earthquake, when "never before," as Goethe remarked, "had the Demon of Fear so quickly and so powerfully spread horror throughout the land." Clark conveniently links the use of fear for aesthetic purposes with the publication, in the following year, of Burke's *Inquiry Into the Nature of the Sublime*, in which ideas of pain, danger, and all kinds of extremity are specifically connected to any true experience of the sublime. It was at about this same early date that the famous prison prints of Piranesi were first published, with their grim, sinister, and unspecifically horrifying architectural details, celebrating the dark and scary aspects of the ruins of Roman antiquity that Piranesi loved to contemplate.

THE DELIBERATELY CLASSIC SPIRIT, on the other hand, was first articulated in exactly the same period by the German scholar Winckelmann, the first modern art historian, who published his *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Art* in 1755. He was the first in modern times to conjure up the extremely potent vision of antiquity as the source of light, purity, order, and antique style as the loftiest vehicle of artistic expression. Lord Clark

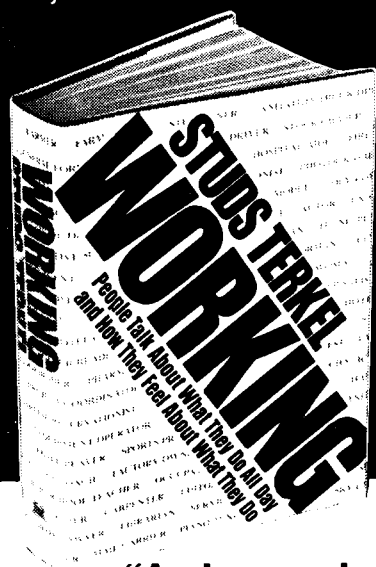
suggests that the works of Burke and Winckelmann were the sources of an essentially willed division between the two opposing sets of ideas about the basic aims and proper characteristics of art that developed in the latter half of the eighteenth century. He is careful to point out that in the very greatest artists romantic and classic impulses co-exist and nourish one another, and always have.

After dealing with the extraordinary productions of Piranesi, Clark takes a look at Fuseli, who lived in his native Switzerland and in Piranesi's Rome before bringing his fevered imagination to work its influence on English sensibilities. The romantic characteristics of this artist's graphic style Clark calls mannerist, invoking the "modish, erotic, and bizarre" qualities of certain late-sixteenth-century artists who in their own day could ape the details of Michelangelo's style without ever aspiring to his level of seriousness. But Fuseli shares with Blake the quality of obsessiveness, of being plagued by persistent images drawn up from visionary depths to which meanings or subjects later attached themselves. Clark is quite superficial when discussing Blake's writings, which tends to lead one to question the seriousness of Clark's attention to the pictures. He does demonstrate the interesting connection between Blake's drawings and the sinuous flavor of medieval manuscript illumination.

Rather than dwelling on the even more conventional connection between Blake and Michelangelo, he discusses Blake's debt to the whole arsenal of gothic imagery and attributes his obsession with recumbent figures to his early job of drawing the monuments in Westminster Abbey.


IN CONTRAST TO the inward or inspired visions of Blake and Fuseli, as well as to the feathery realm of Turner's suns and storms, Clark presents the massive figure of Ingres, arch-classicist and Emperor of Art in France for decades; and along with him come the opposing Frenchmen, Géricault and Delacroix, and all their preoccupations with disease, madness, and other extremes in nature—fear (again), sex, and violence. Ingres was born in 1780 and did not die until 1867, when the pre-Raphaelites, the impressionists, Courbet, and Whistler were all in full swing. Turner's life had been just as long and productive, but his art had utterly transformed itself in that time, while Ingres spent his life perpetually polishing his very early established mastery. His is the classicism Clark defines as the "true" kind, which "aims at the final presentation of truth and the long chiseling away of form until it reaches the idea." This puts him in a direct line with Poussin before him and Degas after him, in whom the same constant refining


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of favorite images can be seen in process. Ingres's own private romanticism—deep under his frock coat, as Clark says—took the form of a profound sensuality and a response both to female nakedness and to the creative appeal of fashionable dress. Ingres's sense of fashion is truly remarkable. Most artists who live a very long time, if they have indeed captured the essence of the mode in their early maturity, are often very much less at home representing later fashions; but Ingres managed to catch the exact note of ideal perfection at each successive stage of nineteenth-century fashion, always knowing exactly what to exaggerate and what to minimize. It was a period filled with extreme changes of mode, and Ingres's technical style itself changed very little; but his perfect eye, resting on the slide of fabric over a sloping shoulder, or the casually perfect disarray of waistcoat, collar, and cravat, was perpetually alive to the tiny shifts of emphasis and alterations of line in which the crucial advances of chic are expressed. For fifty years everybody wanted to be painted or drawn by him, to find out how marvelous they looked in their clothes, and Clark is careful to remind us twice that the painter's grandfather had been a master-tailor. Ingres's nudes, on the other hand, are bizarre studies in sensual abstraction—timeless, fashionless, and disturbing.

GOYA IS THE OTHER wayward genius who, like Turner, nevertheless found himself loved and his talent fostered early by the reigning powers of his time. The king and court took him for their own, with all his terrifying subject matter and unflattering portraiture. His agonies were inner, although augmented without doubt by illness and deafness in later life, as well as by the atrocities committed in Spain by Napoleon's soldiers; but before the end of the century he had already created the *Caprichos*, those striking expressions of pain and disgust, and had presented them to the king. He had already invented what later became accepted romantic subjects, what Clark calls "the whole works: witches, tortures, shipwrecks, assassinations." He had used them vividly and economically in black-and-white compositions devoid of the rhetorical posturing that seemed so necessary to Fuseli and to later romantic artists—"the horror comics of the early nineteenth century," as Clark calls them. Like Beethoven, who also died deaf in the same year, Goya was an original with whom the rest of the world eventually

had to catch up. Clark shows how the famous massacre painting, *The Third of May, 1808*, painted at least six years after the event, when Goya was nearly seventy, looks much more immediate and, incidentally, much more modern than the twenty-six-year-old Delacroix's *Massacre at Chios*, painted in 1824 about something that had happened in 1822. We also learn from this book that the aged Goya went to the Paris Salon of 1824, where he saw not only the Delacroix painting but also *The Hay-Wain* of John Constable, which Géricault and Isabey had seen in London and had arranged to have sent over to Paris. When the young Delacroix saw the Constable, he was evidently so impressed that he had *The Massacre at Chios* taken back to his studio so that he could brighten up the background.

WHAT GOYA THOUGHT is not recorded, but it is one of the virtues of Lord Clark's book that he gives us such electric moments in the history of art, when vigorous and original artists came face-to-face with one another's work across national boundaries and generation gaps. *The Romantic Rebellion* is an avowed piece of patchwork, coming to grips piecemeal with the artists and their works, rather than wholly with the concept embodied in the title. Other scholars—such as Robert Rosenblum, for example—analyze this same subject more intelligently and comprehensively; Lord Clark not only makes the pictures vivid but also makes the artists seem like real men and the reader like a keenly responsive patron. When he says that Millet's *Shepherdess* seems to have been painted in black-currant syrup, or that the hand of Ingres's *Thetis* is half-octopus, he rivets our attention and sympathy totally, just as he does when he hilariously describes Rodin seeking inspiration in his studio, surrounded by seven naked, potbellied, life-size statues of Balzac. So fluid and strong is his appreciative faculty that it envelops any objection his audience might have to his opinions or even to his facts. When he quite erroneously avers that self-portraits always show the artist in an amiable mood, or that Degas found draftsmanship easy, we somehow can always forgive him because he is so personally and passionately in love with art. His infinitely experienced eye is still perpetually dazzled and still seeking more enlightenment to share with fellow admirers of the world's treasures. □

Hard Times for the Mother Tongue

OUR OWN WORDS

by Mary Helen Dohan

Introduction by Alistair Cooke

Knopf, 247 pp., \$7.95

Reviewed by Stephen Koch

Among the great Western languages, English has resisted most successfully the "purifications" of the academy. The language has discovered something like its genius in its lush, eclectic, assimilating vulgarity. Again and again, it has subdued the polyglot historical and ethnic forces pushing into it—from the Normans to the Puerto Ricans—to emerge once again as English, "mere English," only more so. One inevitably thinks of an American metaphor: The language resembles a linguistic Mississippi, into which all things flow, while the big river just keeps rolling along. The French are notoriously our opposites in this respect. Until recently, the French academy and its practical arm, the national school system, maintained throughout the country a standardized ascetic elegance—it is really a style—which has kept Larousse a third the size of Webster's and has forced French to be a language of elegant constructions, seriously deficient in English's supply of—well—exact words, *les mots justes*.

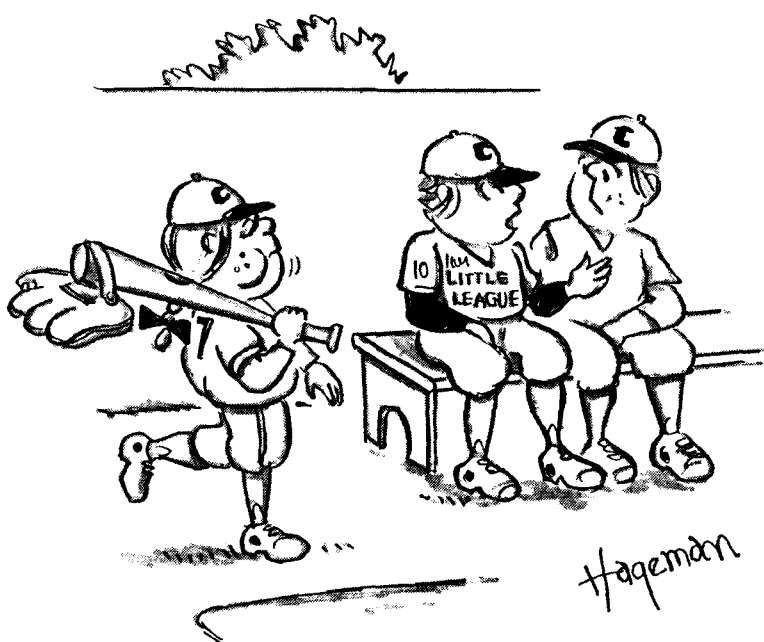
No institutional force of comparable standardizing clout has ever prevailed against the greedy omnivorousness of the English tongue—with the possible exception of the Oxbridgean speech inculcated from birth in the British upper classes. But most of the English-speaking peoples have played it fast and loose, as Mary Helen Dohan is thrilled to report in her cheerful little book, *Our Own Words*, a popular survey of the development of American English. There is plenty of information in this book, and almost anyone will learn something from reading it. But though Mrs. Dohan is plainly very knowledgeable and well educated, it must be said that *Our Own Words* is from top to bottom an opus innocent of the slightest original scholarship, the slightest proximity to the most exciting recent advances in linguistics, or, for that matter, anything of the slightest consequence to say on a subject that is,

after all, on all our lips every day. It is less a book than a list, but unlike the dictionary, it can be read straight through because the list of American words is arranged according to people and time of origin. The book breezes comfortably by—it's popular, tasty, informative, not precisely wrong, but mere information. Almost entirely neglected are the history of the American accents, the structure of dialects, and that crucial area of current linguistics: syntax, rhetoric, ultimately the conception of the world implicit in a given manner of speaking. Questions of class and sex get short shrift, and, wholly concerned with vocabulary, the book tells us nothing about literacy or the development of that peculiarly American voice one hears emerging in, say, William James.

MRS. DOHAN'S CHEERY DELIGHT in our fluent anarchy is infectious, but not easy to square with the agonies presently afflicting the American educational system. It is perhaps an exaggeration—but a plausible one—to say that the teaching of English in the United States is currently in a state of intellectual rout. It would be easy to mount a thorough attack on the intellectual habits of departments of English—the stultified, unexamined canons, the depressingly lax standards, the morose intellectual box in which so many of the professors are trapped. But more and more, the battle line must be drawn at a tedious but crucial little subject called Standard English. Listening to the current polemics, one might gather that Standard English is

somehow highly literate and the mandarin of upper-crust speech. It is nothing of the kind. It is simply more or less correct English. It is not the King's English (whatever that is, Oxbridgean?); it can't be called a dialect except tendentiously (and several very tendentious linguists do so), since, correctly spoken, it easily encompasses an international array of regional dialects. It bears no resemblance to the language defended with such ferocity by the French academy; it is far too various and flexible for that. There is nothing fancy or overwhelming about it. Its fundamental structural habits are very simple, and (except perhaps for children born into the most extreme of the illiterate English dialects) there is no reason why it should not be second nature to anyone of normal intelligence by the age of fifteen. It is strictly a problem for secondary education; its classic defender is the schoolmarm forever banishing *ain't*. It has only this claim to fame: It is the fundamental—and indispensable—basis for educated speech, writing, and thought in the English language.

Indispensable? The American universities are currently crammed with students who have no command over it whatsoever. And this fact, grounds for despair, is being promoted by some as grounds for celebration. Throughout this discussion, I do not wish to attack the many remarkable teachers across the country who daily accomplish remarkable things. But the fact is that a grotesque proportion of students coming from the secondary schools are close to being functional illiterates. Even middle-



"She not only bats .350 and fields like a flash, but she chews real tobacco."