

shock of the new robert hughes

shock of the new robert hughes, the seminal art criticism series and accompanying book by the esteemed Robert Hughes, remains a towering achievement in how we understand and engage with modern and contemporary art. Hughes, with his incisive intellect and captivating prose, delves into the revolutionary movements and iconic figures that have shaped the visual landscape from the late 19th century to the late 20th century. This exploration is not merely a historical survey; it's a passionate dissection of artistic innovation, societal shifts, and the very definition of what constitutes art. We will explore the genesis of "The Shock of the New," Hughes's distinctive critical approach, and the lasting impact of his unflinching gaze on the art world.

Understanding The Shock of the New: Robert Hughes's Vision

The Genesis and Impact of Robert Hughes's Masterpiece

Robert Hughes's "The Shock of the New" first captivated audiences as a landmark television documentary series in 1980, produced by the BBC. This ambitious undertaking aimed to demystify modern art for a broad public, presenting complex artistic evolutions with clarity and wit. The series was met with widespread acclaim for its intellectual rigor, its vibrant visual style, and Hughes's unparalleled ability to connect art to broader social and cultural currents. Following the success of the television program, Hughes expanded his ideas into a bestselling book of the same title, which has since become a foundational text for art students and enthusiasts alike. The "shock of the new" itself refers to the disruptive, often confrontational nature of artistic innovation, a theme that Hughes consistently championed.

The Television Series: A Public Introduction to Modern Art

The television series was groundbreaking in its approach. Hughes, a natural orator with a sharp wit, guided viewers through the major artistic revolutions, from Impressionism and Cubism to Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art. He eschewed dry academic discourse for vivid storytelling, often placing artworks within their historical and political contexts. The visual presentation was equally important, with innovative use of filming techniques

and access to significant museum collections worldwide. This accessibility was crucial in demystifying what could often be perceived as an elitist or impenetrable subject, making modern art a topic of public conversation.

The Book: A Deeper Dive into Artistic Revolutions

The book version of "The Shock of the New" provided an even more comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the themes introduced in the television series. Hughes meticulously detailed the lives and works of key artists, offering critical analyses that were both insightful and provocative. He argued that the history of modern art is one of continuous rupture and reinvention, a series of "shocks" that challenged established norms and perceptions. The book's enduring popularity is a testament to Hughes's ability to synthesize vast amounts of information into a coherent and compelling narrative, solidifying its status as essential reading for anyone interested in the evolution of Western art.

Robert Hughes's Critical Methodology: Authority and Provocation

Robert Hughes was never one to shy away from expressing his opinions, and "The Shock of the New" is a prime example of his distinctive critical voice. He possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of art history, but it was his unwavering conviction and his willingness to challenge prevailing orthodoxies that set him apart. Hughes believed that art criticism should be an active, engaged practice, not a passive recitation of established facts. He applied a rigorous, often polemical, lens to his subjects, seeking to understand the forces that drove artistic creation and reception.

Demystifying Art for the Masses

A core tenet of Hughes's approach was to make art accessible. He understood that many people felt intimidated by contemporary art, and his work sought to bridge that gap. By explaining the historical context, the artistic intentions, and the societal implications of different movements, he empowered viewers to form their own informed opinions. His critiques were never condescending; instead, they were invitations to engage with art on a deeper level, to question, and to appreciate the revolutionary spirit that often defined artistic progress.

The Role of the Critic: Articulation and Judgment

Hughes saw the art critic as an essential interpreter and arbiter. He believed that a critic's role was to articulate the significance of art, to provide a framework for understanding its value and its impact. This involved not just describing artworks but also making judgments, identifying genuine innovation from mere trend-following. His critiques were often characterized by their strong sense of authority, derived from his deep knowledge and his clear, often acerbic, prose. He wasn't afraid to champion artists he admired or to dismiss those he found lacking substance, making his assessments always compelling.

Key Themes Explored in The Shock of the New

"The Shock of the New" covers a vast chronological and stylistic territory, examining the pivotal moments and figures that propelled art forward. Hughes structures his narrative around the concept of radical change, showing how artists consistently pushed boundaries and redefined artistic possibilities. The series and book offer a nuanced perspective on the interplay between artistic vision, technological advancements, and societal transformation.

The Avant-Garde and the Challenge to Tradition

A central theme is the rise of the avant-garde, those artists who actively sought to break away from established artistic traditions. Hughes explores how movements like Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism each represented a profound departure from academic conventions. These artistic revolutions were often met with resistance and misunderstanding, reflecting the "shock of the new" that such radical departures inevitably engendered. He highlights how these movements, driven by a desire for new ways of seeing and representing the world, laid the groundwork for all subsequent modern art.

The Impact of Technology and Society on Art

Hughes astutely recognized that artistic innovation rarely occurs in a vacuum. He meticulously illustrated how technological advancements, such as photography and cinema, influenced painting and sculpture, forcing artists to reconsider their own media. Furthermore, he delved into the profound impact of societal changes—wars, industrialization, urbanization, and shifting political landscapes—on artistic expression. The art movements discussed are shown to be inextricably linked to the turbulent social and political climates in which they emerged, providing a rich tapestry of interconnected

forces.

From Impressionism to Postmodernism: A Chronological Journey

The narrative of "The Shock of the New" traces a chronological arc through major art historical periods:

- The Impressionist revolution and its radical approach to light and color.
- The Post-Impressionist exploration of subjective experience and symbolic meaning.
- The fragmentation of form in Cubism and its challenge to traditional perspective.
- The expressive power and emotional intensity of Fauvism and Expressionism.
- The radical experiments of Futurism and Dadaism in response to modernity.
- The monumental impact of Abstract Expressionism on the post-war art scene.
- The emergence of Pop Art and its engagement with mass culture.
- The beginnings of Postmodernism and its questioning of grand narratives.

Each chapter or episode dedicates significant attention to the artists, their techniques, and the intellectual currents that shaped their work, offering a comprehensive overview of artistic evolution.

The Enduring Legacy of Robert Hughes and The Shock of the New

Decades after its initial release, "The Shock of the New" continues to resonate with audiences and scholars alike. Robert Hughes's work remains a benchmark for insightful, engaging, and accessible art criticism. Its influence can be seen in contemporary art discourse, in educational curricula, and in the ongoing public appreciation of modern and contemporary art. The series and book serve as a powerful reminder that art's most vital function is often its capacity to surprise, challenge, and provoke.

A Standard for Art Criticism

Hughes set a high bar for art criticism, demonstrating that it could be both intellectually rigorous and immensely entertaining. His ability to weave together historical context, artistic analysis, and social commentary created a potent formula for understanding art. Many contemporary critics and historians still look to his work as a model for how to engage with art in a meaningful and accessible way. The authority and clarity of his voice continue to inspire, encouraging a more dynamic and critical engagement with the visual arts.

Inspiring Future Generations

"The Shock of the New" has undoubtedly inspired countless individuals to explore the world of art. For many, it was their first introduction to the complexities and wonders of modern art, sparking a lifelong passion. The accessible yet profound approach ensures its continued relevance for new generations of art lovers and students. The series and book remain invaluable resources for anyone seeking to grasp the revolutionary spirit that defines the trajectory of art history in the modern era.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central thesis or argument Robert Hughes makes in 'The Shock of the New'?

Hughes's central thesis in 'The Shock of the New' is that modern art, from Impressionism onwards, has consistently challenged and redefined established notions of beauty, taste, and representation, often through a deliberate process of 'shocking' the audience, leading to a continuous cycle of innovation and critical re-evaluation.

Which art movements or periods are most prominently discussed in 'The Shock of the New'?

'The Shock of the New' primarily focuses on the evolution of modern art from the late 19th century, covering movements like Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Minimalism, up to the art of the late 20th century.

How did Robert Hughes view the role of 'shock' in

the development of modern art?

Hughes viewed 'shock' not as an end in itself, but as a vital catalyst for artistic and societal change. He argued that modern artists intentionally disrupted traditional aesthetics and expectations to force viewers to confront new ideas, confront uncomfortable truths, and ultimately expand their understanding of what art could be.

What is Hughes's critique of certain aspects of contemporary art as presented in 'The Shock of the New'?

While celebrating innovation, Hughes was often critical of what he saw as the commodification and intellectual dilution of art in its later stages. He expressed concern about art becoming overly conceptual, detached from genuine aesthetic experience, or dominated by market forces and a culture of self-referentiality.

Why is 'The Shock of the New' considered a seminal work in art criticism and documentary filmmaking?

'The Shock of the New' is considered seminal because it made complex art historical narratives accessible and engaging to a broad audience through Hughes's witty, erudite, and often provocative prose, combined with compelling visuals. It offered a critical yet passionate perspective that shaped public understanding and discourse around modern and contemporary art.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Robert Hughes's *The Shock of the New*, along with their descriptions:

1. The Shock of the New: The Making of Modern Art

This is the companion book to Hughes's iconic BBC television series of the same name. It explores the major movements and figures of modern art, from Impressionism through to the early postmodern era, with Hughes's characteristic wit and insightful critique. The book offers a sweeping narrative of artistic innovation and societal change.

2. The Fatal Shore: The Epic of Australia's Founding Convicts

While not directly about art, this seminal work by Robert Hughes delves into a different kind of "shock of the new" – the brutal establishment of colonial Australia. It vividly recounts the harsh realities of transportation, the convict system, and the clash between the invaders and Indigenous peoples. Hughes's powerful prose brings this foundational, and often shocking, period of Australian history to life.

3. American Visions: The Epic History of the Arts in America

Another monumental work by Robert Hughes, *American Visions* examines the evolution of art and culture in the United States. It traces the unique trajectory of American artistic expression, from colonial times to the late 20th century, highlighting its distinct characteristics and its relationship to the nation's identity. The book showcases how American artists grappled with new ideas and social landscapes.

4. *Nothing if Not Critical: Selected Essays on Art and Politics*

This collection showcases Robert Hughes's sharp intellect and unwavering critical voice across a range of topics. His essays dissect contemporary art trends, cultural phenomena, and political events with incisive analysis and often acerbic humor. Readers will find a similar boldness in his observations here as in *The Shock of the New*.

5. *A Culture of Fear: America, the Media, and the Politics of Terror*

In this thought-provoking work, Robert Hughes critiques the pervasive culture of fear in contemporary America, particularly as amplified by media. He argues how this manufactured anxiety impacts society, politics, and public discourse. The book's examination of societal anxieties offers a parallel to the cultural shifts Hughes explored in *The Shock of the New*.

6. *The Water Music: A Novel*

While primarily known as a critic and historian, Robert Hughes also ventured into fiction. *The Water Music* is a historical novel that, like his non-fiction, demonstrates a keen eye for detail and a compelling narrative. It transports the reader to a different time, exploring themes of social change and individual lives within larger historical currents.

7. *Goya*

This biography of the Spanish master Francisco Goya by Robert Hughes is a testament to his ability to bring historical figures and their art to life. Hughes contextualizes Goya's revolutionary work within the tumultuous political and social landscape of his time, exploring the artist's engagement with war, madness, and societal upheaval. It provides a deep dive into a pivotal artistic figure who challenged conventions.

8. *The New Spirit: American Ideas and the Art of the 1930s*

This book explores the artistic and intellectual ferment of the 1930s in America, a period of significant social and economic change. It examines how artists and thinkers responded to the Great Depression and the rise of new ideologies. Like *The Shock of the New*, it focuses on how art reflects and shapes a society undergoing profound transformation.

9. *Modern Art: A Very Short Introduction*

While not by Hughes himself, this concise introduction offers an accessible overview of the key movements and concepts in modern art. It serves as a good starting point for understanding the context and themes that Robert Hughes so brilliantly illuminated in his more expansive works. The book provides essential background for appreciating the "shock" that new art often delivers.

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