

The Power of Art

By Simon Schama

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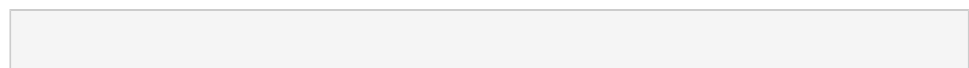
"Great art has dreadful manners," Simon Schama observes wryly at the start of his epic and explosive exploration of the power, and whole point, of art. "The hushed reverence of the gallery can fool you into believing masterpieces are polite things; visions that soothe, charm and beguile, but actually they are thugs. Merciless and wily, the greatest paintings grab you in a headlock, rough up your composure, and then proceed in short order to re-arrange your sense of reality. . . ."

With the same disarming force, *The Power of Art* propels us on an eye-opening, breathtaking odyssey, zooming in on eight extraordinary masterpieces, from Caravaggio's *David and Goliath* to Picasso's *Guernica*. Jolting us far from the comfort zone of the hushed art gallery, Schama closes in on intense make-or-break turning points in the lives of eight great artists who, under extreme stress, created something unprecedented, altering the course of art forever.

The embattled heroes—Caravaggio, Bernini, Rembrandt, David, Turner, Van Gogh, Picasso and Rothko—each in his own resolute way, faced crisis with steadfast defiance, pitting passion and conviction against scorn and short-sightedness. The masterpieces they created challenged convention, shattered complacency, shifted awareness and changed the way we look at the world.

With vivid storytelling and powerfully evocative descriptive passages, Schama explores the dynamic personalities of the artists and the spirit of the times they lived through, capturing the flamboyant theatre of bourgeois life in Amsterdam, the passion and paranoia of Revolutionary Paris, and the carnage and pathos of Civil War Spain.

Most compelling of all, *The Power of Art* traces the extraordinary evolution of eight "eye-popping" world-class works of art. Created in a bolt of illumination, such works "tell us something about how the world is, how it is to be inside our skins, that no more prosaic source of wisdom can deliver. And when they do that, they answer, irrefutably and majestically, the nagging question of every reluctant art-conscript . . . 'OK, OK, but what's art really for?'"



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Schama presents eight remarkable artists who created their masterworks against a backdrop of personal and professional distress. From politically charged commentaries (David, Picasso, Turner and Rembrandt) to intensely personal visions of the world (van Gogh and Rothko) and the reinvention of the divine (Bernini and Caravaggio), Schama takes these masters' hallowed works off the museum wall and drags them through in the mud and muck that went into their creation: Bernini's savage attack on his mistress with a razor, Caravaggio's rapacious gutter lifestyle, Turner's hands-on (and more) approach to painting, David's willingness to follow his political allegiances no matter the cost. Schama's approach succeeds admirably in breaking away from conventional art history; throughout, he comes across like a cool British uncle talking about art late into the night. He renders these canonical works and their creators immediate and hip, conveying what it might have been like to be shocked by their audacity and sheer newness. This book should be of great value in a classroom, making an enormously appealing introduction for students encountering these artists for the first time. Though professional art historians will not find much new here in the way of research and analysis, anyone even remotely interested in art will find much to enjoy. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

About the Author

Simon Schama is University Professor of Art History and History at Columbia University in New York. His award-winning books include *Scribble, Scribble, Scribble*; *The American Future: A History*; National Book Critics Circle Award winner *Rough Crossings*; *The Power of Art*; *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*; *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*; *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)*; *Landscape and Memory*; *Rembrandt's Eyes*; and the *History of Britain* trilogy. He has written and presented forty television documentary films for the BBC, PBS, and The History Channel, including the Emmy-winning *Power of Art*, on subjects that range from John Donne to Tolstoy.

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