

Books do Furnish a Painting by Jamie Camplin and Maria Ranauro

5 stars

My two passions – Books and Art – what a joy!

When I was given this book to review I thought all my Christmases had come at once! To have a book about books in art is truly inspired, given that a good painting provides an insight into the sitter, to include a book seems to me to be eminently logical. Sitters are human, and humans love to read.

Since humans learned to write, the printed word has been a succour, whether in the form of ancient parchments, religious guidance, biographies, a useful handbook or, of course, the fictional novel.

The authors both have a background in history, Camplin as a writer and Ranauro as an art historian. They both have worked for Thames and Hudson and so have been in a prime position to know what makes a good read. This one is excellent.

Not all artists have loved books, but a great many have, and this book reflects how paintings began to feature books as more people became literate. The beginnings of the symbiotic relationship between the two media can be identified in ancient illuminated manuscripts where art was used to glorify the words on the page.

This book looks at 165 paintings where books can tell us about life over time; social history lessons in major topics such as gender, class, education and leisure.

For me the first real portrait is by a Russian artist, Ilya Repin, who painted his friend Vsevolod Mikhailovich Garshin in 1884. The pain and sadness in the image cannot be mistaken and reflects his sorrow at the suicides of his father and brother and the prospect of his own four years later. Are the books and papers on his desk related to his inheritance or to his work? We cannot know, but clearly, they are offering him no comfort.

In contrast, other paintings look at books in a peaceful domestic setting, while others appear in paintings about human's pleasures. On page 187, we see a 'ménage à trois' as the man sits reading in the presence of two of the artist's lovers. One of my favourites is Neue Sachlichkeit on page 192, which satirises the petite bourgeoisie and features Berlin's Die Grune Post, the 'Sunday newspaper for City and Country'.

Books are shown as things of wisdom, whether a painting shows a mother reading to a child, or a country gent posed in front of his bookcase.

This is not a book to read in one sitting, but to dip into over a period, to enjoy at leisure.

Pashtpaws

Breakaway Reviewers received a copy of the book to review.