

Art History with a capital A and H: Art critic and social historian Robert Hughes (1938-2012)

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Australian-born art critic and social historian Robert Hughes was fond of framing the historical periods that he examined with bookends—significant events that summed up the character of an age. He began his 1980 television series about modern art, “The Shock of the New,” with the opening of the Eiffel Tower in Paris in 1889 as a symbol of all that was progressive and optimistic about modernity. In his epilogue to the series, “The New Shock of the New,” made 25 years later, he closed what he called the “project of the modern” with the collapse of the World Trade Towers in the new capital of the art world, New York City.

Hughes’s own death last month at the age of 74 serves as a bookend of a kind. It marks the passage of a generation of critics and social commentators who held out against the formidable pressure on intellectuals to make their peace with capitalism and shift to the right after the upheavals of the postwar period died down. They continued to analyze cultural developments with an acerbic wit and integrity not yet found in their successors.

Hughes’s central argument throughout his prolific career was that the complacent and culturally degraded state of the arts in the early twenty-first century had not always been the case. In earlier periods, and particularly at the outset of the twentieth century, art had a great deal to say about life that was genuinely new as well as substantial, and its decline was rooted in changes in the present social order itself.

To a large extent, Hughes shared the 1960s radical milieu’s rejection of any alternative outcome to the Russian Revolution than Stalinism, which limited his analysis of the postwar period. Despite his essentially pessimistic social and historical outlook, however, Hughes maintained an abiding commitment to the principles of Modernism. He continued to think in terms of Art History with a capital A and H, with all that implied.

Hughes insisted that it was possible to determine if an art work had something fresh and vital to say about the world in which we live: “what was good, what was bad, and why it was important to know the difference.” His refusal to go along with postmodernism—its obsessive and subjectivist focus on personal identity issues—earned him the label of elitism, ironic for one who probably did more to make art accessible to a popular audience than any other art critic in the late twentieth century.

Born in Sydney on July 28, 1938, Hughes’s was a rebellious nature in rebellious times. In the early 1960s, he left Sydney University without completing his architecture course. Intent at first on becoming an artist, he left behind what he considered the cultural backwater of Australia to travel in Europe, absorbing Renaissance art and architecture. He ended up

in London, where, in addition to writing art reviews, he plunged into its bohemian countercultural scene. When offered a job as art critic at *Time* magazine in New York, suspicious that the call was a trick by the CIA, Hughes told the editor to bugger off. Luckily, *Time* magazine called back.

Over the course of the next three decades, Hughes wrote a weekly art column for *Time*, covering exhibitions of everything from Dutch old master portraits and early modern artists like Edouard Manet or Vincent Van Gogh, to giving assessments, often scathing, of the period’s art superstars, from Andy Warhol, to Julian Schnabel and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Many of these reviews, together with longer essays written for the *New York Review of Books* and the *New Republic*, were collected in *Nothing If Not Critical: Essays on Art and Artists*, published in 1990. Hughes’s pieces flash with insight and wit, all within a strict word count, bringing art that might otherwise be considered esoteric to a broad audience in a popular magazine format.

The ideal of making the criticism of art an art form itself was pioneered by another notable wit, Irish-born playwright, poet, essayist and social satirist Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). Like Wilde, Hughes insisted that art should hold to the highest aesthetic standards without compromising with the philistine demands of popular taste. As Wilde wrote in his essay “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (1891), the point was not to make art more popular, but the populace more artistic.

Hughes’s eight-part television series “The Shock of the New,” first broadcast by the BBC in 1980 and then in United States on public television in 1981, did just that. Reviewing the series today, one is struck first by the tremendous degradation of public cultural life in just three decades. It is almost inconceivable that public funds would be available today to produce such a series, which gave millions of viewers such a thorough, and thoroughly entertaining, introduction to modern art.

Though dated in some small ways, the series remains well worth watching (most of the episodes are available in full on YouTube). “The Shock of the New” inventively combines rare film footage with present-day views of places and art works, together with a variety of interviews, and Hughes’s own narrative, to bring to life not just an artistic movement, but the whole cultural period known as Modernism. More vividly than many other art history accounts, it grounds the radical departure seen in art work around the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century in Europe and America with changes in humanity’s way of life itself.

For example, Hughes details the technological innovations that the archetypal modern artist Pablo Picasso (b. 1881) would have witnessed by the age of 25—the machine gun, the Parsons steam turbine, photographic paper, Tesla’s electric motor, the Kodak box camera, the Dunlop pneumatic tire, the Ford car, cinematograph and gramophone discs, X-rays, radio telegraphy, the Lumière brothers’ movie camera, the Wright brothers’ first flight, and so the list goes on, to include Freud’s studies on hysteria and the 1905 *annus mirabilis* in theoretical physics and Albert Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity.

But what gave *avant-garde* art its dynamism, he argued, was not just technological change, but the imperative felt by artists, no less than other people, to overthrow the whole oppressive social order that would bring the “civilized” world with all its technological feats to the brink of destruction on the battlefields of World War I and the economic crises and political upheavals that followed.

The second episode in the series opens with a view of the battlefield of the Somme in France where in just six months in 1916, 1 million Allied and German soldiers were mowed down with machine guns, bombed in trenches or poisoned with mustard gas, giving mankind its first horrifying experience of mass industrialized warfare and destruction. Placed in this context, it wasn’t art that was shocking with its violent colors and fragmented new forms—it was reality.

And Hughes shows too how, for a period at least, revolutionary art was connected to revolutionary politics. Artists of the Berlin Dada group such as Georg Grosz, whom Hughes dubbed the “Bolshevik of painting,” and particularly Russian *avant-garde* Constructivists like Naum Gabo (who appears in an interview) and Vladimir Tatlin, called the “Leonardo of the Russian Revolution,” were among those who saw socialist revolution as the future and insisted art would play a role in that transformation.

So what happened to Modernism? Though willing to give revolution its due in animating early Modernism, Hughes’s acceptance—with some nuance perhaps—of the prevailing argument within postwar intellectual circles that Stalinism was the inevitable outcome of the Russian Revolution, that Stalinism and Fascism were twins, as could be seen in the parallels between the art and architecture of these authoritarian regimes, etc., inevitably distorts and weakens this section of “The Shock of the New.”

In addition to his many reviews and television series on art, Hughes wrote *The Fatal Shore* (1987), an international bestseller, which served to introduce many to both Hughes as a writer and to Australia’s turbulent history. In 1997, he wrote and produced “American Visions,” a series on American art. After recovering from a near-fatal car accident while in Australia in 1999 producing *The Fatal Shore* for television, Hughes made a deeply personal and moving study of the art of Spanish Enlightenment artist Francisco Goya (1746-1828), “Goya: Crazy Like a Genius,” broadcast by the BBC in 2002. He wrote a memoir, *Things I Didn’t Know*, in 2006 and his final published work, which met with mixed reviews, was *Rome: A Cultural, Visual and Personal History* (2011).

But what ultimately led to him being sidelined by critical circles as an opinionated curmudgeon was his unequivocal condemnation of the role of finance capital in the arts. This became the theme he returned to again and again in the documentaries “The New Shock of the New” (2005) and particularly in “The Mona Lisa Curse” (2008) (see “Robert Hughes: A refreshingly frank comment on the art market”).

Tracing the growing commercialization of the arts, which he saw as

beginning in the 1960s with the work of American artist Andy Warhol, Hughes insisted on the qualitative change in the nature of art itself wrought by such vast quantities of money coursing through the art market—\$20 billion of contemporary art was being sold annually by 2006, and prices have only continued to break records since the financial collapse of 2008.

Few critics besides Hughes could—or would—have made such mincemeat in person of the likes of art dealer David Mughrabi, whose family’s collection of 3,000 works is considered to be the largest and most valuable in the world, including 800 pieces by Warhol alone (Hughes: “Don’t you think this gives you a vested interest in keeping the values of his [Warhol’s] work inflated?”).

And there was Hughes’s treatment of Jeff Koons, whose oversized sculptures of balloon animals—produced in a factory by 90 assistants, sold for tens of millions of dollars to wealthy collectors—have defaced public spaces from Versailles to New York, Bilbao, Spain, to Sydney, Australia.

To Hughes, the work of a Koons—or of British art star Damien Hirst (of stuffed shark and jewel-encrusted skull fame) and their ilk—was not even worth taking seriously as art. He rightly considered it just another type of risky asset to be speculated in by hedge-funders and financiers, who now make up the bulk of art collectors.

However, Hughes recognized that the most destructive consequence of this process was that many works of art, such as the painting by Edvard Munch that sold recently for a record-breaking \$120 million, was effectively removed from the public sphere. Museums can no longer afford to acquire art, independent cultural institutions receive ever-dwindling funding, and art like everything else becomes a plaything of the super-rich. For Hughes, this wrecking operation was nothing less than “spiritual vandalism and a cultural obscenity.”

Which is not to say that Hughes thought the situation entirely irredeemable. But his outlook and social position rendered him oblivious to and uninterested in signs that a social revolution might once again be on the horizon, one which could again transform the situation for art and artists, as well as that of the mass of humanity, as it had at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Instead, he found small hope in individual instances, the rare handful of contemporary artists like Paula Rego, Anselm Kiefer, Lucian Freud, David Hockney, and Sean Scully, whose work continues to resonate with the values that Hughes held dearest in art—its enigmatic, painstaking, often subliminal way of making sense of the world. He also felt that people continued to hunger for new art, that “despite the decadence and brouhaha, the desire to experience art, to live with it, remains immortal.”

He will be missed.



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