

The Best Art Books of 2018

The Times's art critics select some of their favorite art books and books related to art of the year.

By **Roberta Smith**, **Holland Cotter** and **Jason Farago**

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From a catalog that sheds new light on black models of mid-19th-century French painting to a collection of mid-1980s art criticism by the novelist and playwright Gary Indiana, the best art books of the past year provided a balm for turbulent times. Below, the New York Times's art critics choose some of their favorites. — *Nicole Herrington, Weekend Arts editor*

Roberta Smith

The histories of art are always in motion if you look hard enough. This year it didn't take much looking to see waves being made by several books and catalogs that delved deeper into familiar areas or pioneered new ones, adding some euphoria to our blighted moment.



Among Roberta Smith's picks are, from left: "Posing Modernity: The Black Model From Manet to Matisse to Today"; "Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor"; and "Hairy Who? 1966-1969," open to three works by Karl Wirsum. Eric Helgas for The New York Times

‘BETWEEN WORLDS: THE ART OF BILL TRAYLOR’ By Leslie Umberger (*Smithsonian American Art Museum in association with Princeton University Press*). The most thrilling book of the year is the catalog to the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s great Traylor exhibition. (On view in Washington, D.C., through March 17.) Starting with a rigorous introduction by the artist Kerry James Marshall, the book combines the formidable research and lively writing of the show’s curator, Ms. Umberger, and it does more than detail as never before the achievement of this singular artist, who was born a slave. She also sets a new art-historical standard, undermining the romantic myth of the outsider as unknowable miracle worker by examining Traylor’s achievement in stunning detail. Moving from the lives of his enslaved parents to the posthumous success of his art, she demonstrates how Traylor’s elegant images distill not only form but also the realities of black life in the South. (Read the exhibition review.)

‘HILMA AF KLINT: PAINTINGS FOR THE FUTURE’ Edited by Tracey Bashkoff (*Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*). The catalog to this extraordinary exhibition at the Guggenheim (running through April 23) similarly fleshes out the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862-1944).

Academically-trained but also mystically-inclined, af Klint is now considered as the first European to make the abstract paintings of early Modernism. She did so several years before the male artists usually credited for its invention, with a boldness of scale and color that would be matched only by the Abstract Expressionists several decades later. In words and pictures this volume follows her closely as she considers abstraction's many possibilities. (Read the exhibition review.)

'POSING MODERNITY: THE BLACK MODEL FROM MANET AND MATISSE TO TODAY' By Denise Murrell (*Yale University Press in association with the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University*). Two decades ago, few areas of art history seemed as exhausted, if not overstudied as late-19th-century French painting. But new ideas and approaches change everything. Thus we have "Posing Modernity" — the catalog to the exhibition (through Feb. 10) at the Mariam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery — both by Ms. Murrell. She delves into the black models who posed for Parisian painters; the black women depicted by the artists of the Harlem Renaissance; and the black body as a subject for contemporary artists, some of them black women themselves. The dots are connected in a new way. (Read the exhibition review.)

'HAIRY WHO? 1966-1969' Edited by Thea Liberty Nichols, Mark Pascale and Ann Goldstein (*Yale University Press*). With its quizzical title, this substantial catalog, like its exhibition (through Jan. 6) at the Art Institute of Chicago, sorts out who was and was not Hairy Who, those six subversive Chicago artists who exhibited together under its rubric for four short years mostly at the Hyde Park Art Center. Led by Karl Wirsum and Jim Nutt, they wreaked havoc with various norms of art, society and gallery presentation. As their ranks expanded to include Roger Brown, Christina Ramberg and Ed Paschke, their cohort became known as the Chicago Imagists and the rest is finally, after an unconscionable delay, beginning to be history.



Elaine de Kooning's "Juarez," 1958. It's among the works by the artist featured in the book "Ninth Street Women."

Elaine de Kooning Trust, via The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation/Art Resource, NY

‘NINTH STREET WOMEN: LEE KRASNER, ELAINE DE KOONING, GRACE HARTIGAN, JOAN MITCHELL AND HELEN FRANKENTHALER: FIVE PAINTERS AND THE MOVEMENT THAT CHANGED MODERN ART’ By Mary Gabriel (*Little, Brown and Company*). At nearly 1,000 pages, Ms. Gabriel’s book teems with details that are almost always fascinating even when not essential. It resembles five biographies woven together against a background populated mostly by men: Abstract Expressionist painters, critics, dealers and curators. But these five women, intermittently friends, persisted and, each in her own way, triumphed. Their combined narrative has an inspiring force and some nugget of information on nearly every page. (Read the book review.)

‘THE COLLECTOR: THE STORY OF SERGEI SHCHUKIN AND HIS LOST MASTERPIECES’ By Natalya Semenova with André Delocque; translated by Anthony Roberts (*Yale University Press*). The French avant-garde paintings assembled by the Russian collector Sergei Shchukin in the early 1900s were exhibited in the West, specifically Paris, for the first time two years ago. Now comes the complex story of Shchukin as an alternately fearless and anxious collector; a successful textile merchant; and a doting husband and father. It is recounted by Ms. Semenova, a longtime Shchukin scholar, with Mr. Delocque, the collector’s grandson. Both collector and

collection survived the Russian Revolution, but not together. The book shows the interiors of Shchukin's Moscow palace lined with paintings (by van Gogh, Gauguin, Matisse and Picasso) whose vivid (digitalized) colors against the grisaille rooms still shock.

'FLASH: THE MAKING OF WEEGEE THE FAMOUS' *By Christopher Bonanos (Henry Holt & Company).* By current standards, the street photographer Arthur Fellig, better known as Weegee, might be considered a kind of performance artist: elbowing his way to the front of the more sensational scenes of New York night life, snapping pictures in his indelible noir style and developing them in the trunk of his car — so as to rush his product to the dailies ahead of the pack. His ambition, self-invention and neuroses are all detailed in this sharp biography by Mr. Bonanos, who clearly admires the artist, sees the unsavory aspects of the man and knows old New York as well as anyone too young to have lived through it. (Read the book review.)

'GOODBYE TO TENTH STREET: A NOVEL' *By Irving Sandler (Pleasure Boat Studio).* Anyone drawn to postwar New York's art scene that centered in part on East 10th Street should read the last book of Mr. Sandler, the art historian and critic extraordinaire who died in June. He was there in the late 1950s and early '60s taking notes while the Abstract Expressionists made history, and he became known for his meticulous accounts of their saga. But here he offers a roman à clef filled with the unverified gossip, overheard conversations, and rumors of nooners and backbiting that were unsuitable to fact-based history (though a few historical figures occupy the margins). The tale — from charged studio visits to nasty exchanges at the Cedar Bar — has its own sad, sordid, unsurprising truth.

'RICHARD PRINCE: HIGH TIMES' *Edited by Richard Prince (Gagosian).* This eccentric volume is a kind of artist's book/self-portrait masquerading as an exhibition catalog. Like its show, it is unusually revealing, providing well-rounded views of a complex artist who generally aims to irritate and frequently succeeds. It not only reflects Mr. Prince's talents for drawing and painting, but also other activities that feed his consummately American art as editor, writer, connoisseur of postwar music and literature and collector of '60s ephemera. The book contains facsimiles of such items, like a postcard that Jimi Hendrix sent to his own father while touring England. (Read the exhibition review.)

Holland Cotter

It was a rough year in the real world: demagoguery, xenophobia, racial violence, killer weather, left-on-left slugfests, internet blah-blah-blah. These books helped me to sort things out and change things up.