

page spread on wigs in one while in the other we find three small illustrations. A section on cosmetics is sketchy at best.

Despite the shortcomings, these titles are useful and informative. The presentation of text and graphics will make them appealing and highly readable to children. A glossary and an index enhance access. While less useful for interpretation, they are an excellent resource of fashion items and styles of the time.

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## A WALK IN THE ARTWORLD

**A Short Walk around the Pyramids & through the World of Art.** Philip M. Isaacson. Random House, 1993. 120 pp., \$25.00 cloth. ISBN 0-679-81523-6.

*A Short Walk* is a tourist's guide to artistic expression, designed to encourage young viewers to take aesthetic pleasure from a range of artistic sources: architecture, sculpture, painting, photography, even chairs and fences. Intriguingly, however, it ignores one particularly relevant art form: book illustration. For this is, after all, an illustrated book—pictures accompanied by a text that explains them.

But Isaacson seems to want readers to forget that. His text continually asserts its own irrelevance, and insists that visual art communicates automatically and intuitively, that "if we only look, we will find that art waits to delight us . . . all we have to do is want it to happen." But if that were really true, would it really need to be said at all?

It does, of course—as the mere existence of Isaacson's own text reveals. Arthur Danto once famously suggested that we could view something as art only within the context of the art theory and art history that actually provide it with its meaning and significance—within what Danto called the "artworld." It is exactly this artworld that Isaacson offers young viewers: his text provides the contexts required to make the pictures meaningful as usually understood by those in the know.

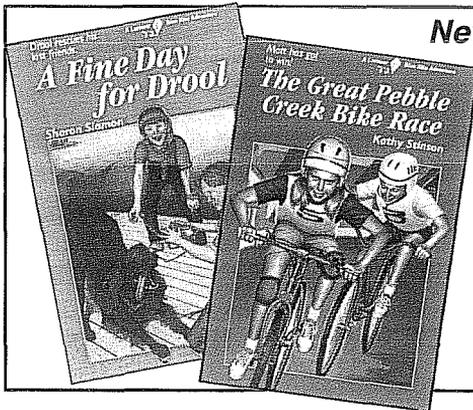
But a major tenet of the "artworld" as currently constituted is that it must deny its own existence, assert that art communicates directly—without any accompanying text, without any knowledge of context or experience. This is somehow supposed to make art seem more powerful, more magical, even more divine. In providing a text which denies the need for a text, Isaacson does exactly what the artworld so paradoxically demands. He gives readers the context they need to believe that *no context is necessary*.

I find this offensive—as offensive as the peculiarly contradictory way in which Isaacson's text continually tells us what "we" see and what "we" feel when we look at the art. As I looked at these pictures, I often didn't see or feel

what the text told me “we” apparently all do. I suspect I’m supposed to feel guilty about that—that the main rhetorical trick of this aspect of the artworld is to cow us by making us feel inadequate if our responses aren’t the correct ones “we” all so automatically feel. But I don’t feel guilty. I merely conclude that I must be lacking this theoretically universal ability to see and feel, and that therefore, art appreciation, as described here, is not for me.

I suspect many young viewers would share my response—it’s certainly the response of most adults when told they should appreciate works like our National Gallery’s infamous *Voice of Fire* without being offered any context in which to understand it. Like the foolishly mystical artworld rhetoric it represents, this book could well have the opposite effect of the one it intends. A more productive guide to art might acknowledge the context of knowledge needed in order to understand and enjoy it—admit that all art inevitably and inescapably “illustrates” texts and contexts it assumes viewers will already know, and therefore, set out to teach those texts and contexts in a more honest and less supercilious fashion.

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