

**John Julius Norwich
(introduction)
Croatia: Aspects of Art,
Architecture and
Cultural Heritage
Frances Lincoln, 2009, £30**

The Yugoslav-born Lady Beresford-Peirse has worked tirelessly to promote the heritage of her native Croatia. Now, after a string of charity concerts, receptions and auctions supporting the International Trust for Croatian Monuments, comes this elegantly produced coffee-table book, which was conceived by her as long ago as 1994.

English-speaking readers previously had to rely upon Anthony Rhodes to introduce them to the small country sandwiched between the Adriatic and the mountains of Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Now Lady Beresford-Peirse has garnered a range of scholars and writers that sounds like a roll call for a Swan Hellenic cruise or a NADFAS outing. They serve her purpose well, ranging from the scholarly to the polemical, opening up the history and culture of the country from the Ancient Greeks (Branko Kirigin) and the late Antique (Professor J J Wilkes on Dalmatian art before Constantine) to the more modern.

The essays vary widely, from a leisurely tour of ancestral houses, setting off on an October Sunday afternoon in the restrained company of Marcus Binney, and the journalistic spleen of Brian Sewell debunking the grandiloquent claims made for dubious works in the Mirama Museum

at the cost of covering collections elsewhere, to the full-blown scholarship of Timothy Clifford, David Ekserdjian and Christopher de Hamel.

These last three offer extensive treatment of the visual arts, Clifford concentrating on the period 1400-1800 and de Hamel compiling an exhaustive gazetteer of illuminated books, their owners and peregrinations. Professor Ekserdjian situates Dalmatian artists within the context of the Italian Renaissance in his study of the chapel of the Blessed Giovanni Orsini (d 1111) in the cathedral at Trogir (Traù), designed by the architect and sculptor Niccolò di Giovanni. The building contract is dated 1468. Others (most recently Samo Štefanac, of the University of Ljubljana) have suggested that the architect may have drawn on Alberti's treatises.

An outstanding chapter on the artist Nicholas of Ragusa (Nikola Božidarević), who travelled in Italy between 1477 and 1494 before returning to his native Dubrovnik, and Donal Cooper's account of the patronage of Dominicans and Franciscans, show how Croatian culture has always been international.

Dr Nicholas Cranfield FSA is a regular arts correspondent for the Church Times.

**Tony Godfrey (editor)
Understanding Art
Objects: Thinking
through the Eye
Sotheby's Institute,
2009, £25**

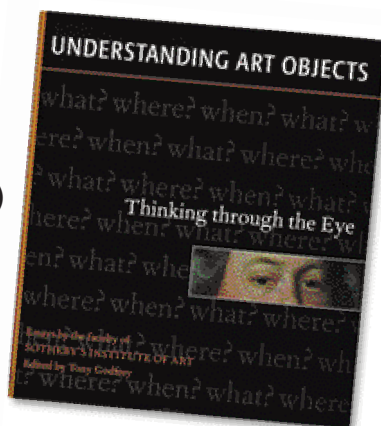
This is a surprising and enjoyable book, owing to the great diversity of objects presented in its 14 essays. Experts have chosen items from a variety of cultures, genres and periods, up to the recent past, that give occasion for detailed

study of context and meaning, including, in some cases, their history in the saleroom. They range from a Japanese samurai helmet through items of de luxe or 'production' furniture, to antique sculpture, a puzzling 19th-century photograph, and conceptual works.

The introduction by Tony Godfrey explains the origins of the Sotheby's Institute as a more practically oriented form of art history than that favoured by universities, with their reliance on literary sources. The contrast may be exaggerated, but academic art history has often shunned the idea of art as a commodity, and has relied increasingly on words as the source of objective knowledge. Museums and salerooms are closer to material fact, and this is reflected in their ways of describing things.

That is one way of looking at the difference, but equally telling might be Isaiah Berlin's saying that 'the fox knows many things but the hedgehog knows one big thing.' The academic probably aims to synthesise the object within a larger pattern of ideas and relationships, something that may take years to achieve. The alternative is the multiple knowledge of the adaptable 'fox', well displayed in the book.

There is another sort of 'thing' that neither of these groups care to know, and indeed take pride in not knowing. It is the approach described in the introduction by Tony Godfrey as "'head-in-the-sand, I only want to look at art" dilettante connoisseurship'. Where are these ostriches to be found? Are they not extinct



yet? Why must connoisseurship necessarily be 'dilettante', and is this word, with its suggestion of interiorised subjective understanding, such a bad quality? Is the truth that, being subjective, it cannot easily be taught or examined, and is therefore no use in an academic context? The subtitle, 'Thinking through the Eye', suggests a different possibility, still fortunately to

be found among some practising artists, but neglected by art's ideological guardians.

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