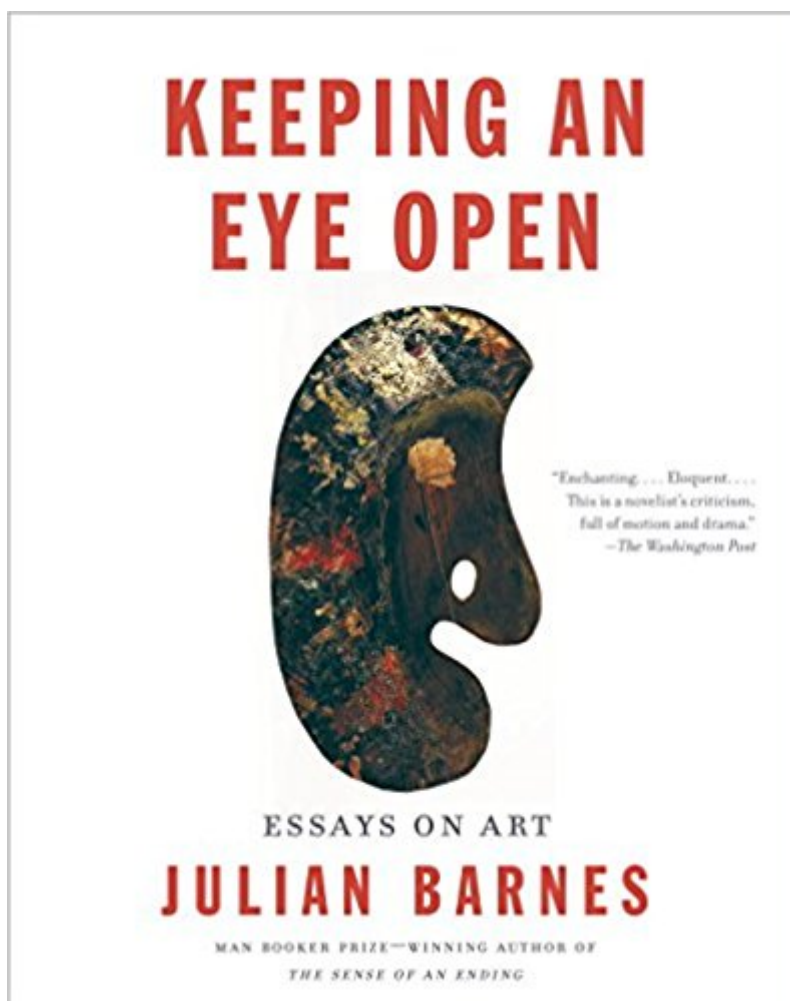


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# Keeping An Eye Open: Essays On Art (Vintage International)



## Synopsis

Flaubert believed that great paintings required no words of explanation. But, as Barnes notes, it is a rare picture that stuns, or argues, us into silence. And when this does happen, we feel compelled to explain the very silence into which we have been plunged. In this illuminating collection of essays on art, Barnes turns his narrative gifts toward some of the most important paintings in the Western canon, eloquently voicing our reactions to these images—what they cause us to think and feel, and why. From Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* to Degas's *The Dance Lesson* to Braque's *Cubism* to the "good soft fun" of Oldenburg, Barnes effortlessly fits these pieces into the larger dramas of the artists' lives and works. Taken together, these essays give us a wonderful overview of art from Romanticism onward—and are a true pleasure to read.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Eloquent. . . . This is a novelist's criticism, full of motion and drama." —The Washington

Post "An engaging and empathetic volume." —The New York Times Book

Review "Perceptive. . . . Generous and discerning." —The Boston Globe "Fascinating

and brilliant. . . . This magnificent survey draws its strength from its intensely personal focus, each

piece reverberating off the others." —The Financial Times "Illuminating. . . . Avid and

thoughtful. . . . [Barnes] chatters like the gifted novelist he is, using his eye for the telling detail, his

narrative intuition and his understanding of the creative process to help us see familiar artists like

Degas, Braque and Magritte afresh, and to appreciate the work of lesser-known masters as well."

"The New York Times" [A] superb collection. . . . Barnes's observations and expression prov[e] equally adept and satisfying. • "Minneapolis Star Tribune" "This is art writing of the first order. . . . Page after page, essay after essay, Barnes pulls off the sort of acrobatically erudite performance that ultimately draws as much admiration for him as for the art he describes. • "Richmond Times-Dispatch" "Powerful accounts of interconnections between art and artist. . . . Sharply observed and richly illuminating. . . . Barnes has a wonderful eye for what makes a great picture, and a command of language that again and again allows readers to share what he sees. • "Times Literary Supplement" "A readable, riveting, informed work with sharp, marvellous anecdotes and observations. . . . In this beautifully illustrated book you're in great company. • "The Irish Independent" "Extremely rewarding, informative, attentive, thoughtful, entertaining. • "The Evening Standard" "Barnes weaves biography, history, philosophy in this fascinating, richly illuminating and beautifully written book. • "Art Quarterly" "s both a pleasure and an education to look over Barnes's shoulder as he interrogates, wonders at, and relishes works of art. He's a critic who prioritizes the objects themselves, and his work is always satisfying. • "Publishers Weekly (starred review)" "Scholarly and astute yet accessible and exciting. . . . Barnes focuses his analytical prowess on significant artists and their oeuvres, opening fresh vistas to readers and viewers. • "Kirkus Reviews (starred)" "Handsomely illustrated, superbly written, felicitously thought-provoking. . . . Barnes is a consummate stylist, not only because of his artistic command of language but also by virtue of his searching intelligence, incisive candor, rogue wit, and righteous fairness. • "Booklist" "[Barnes] digs into fascinating details of isometric proportions. . . . Highly recommended to all art readers. • "Library Journal

Julian Barnes is the author of twenty other books including, most recently, *The Noise of Time*. He has received the Man Booker Prize, the Somerset Maugham Award, the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, the David Cohen Prize for Literature and the E. M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters; in France, the Prix Médicis and the Prix Femina; and in Austria, the State Prize for European Literature. In 2004 he was named Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Ministry of Culture. His work has been translated into more than forty languages. He lives in London. [www.julianbarnes.com](http://www.julianbarnes.com)

Those who have read the stories of Julian Barnes will know how often he builds them around real figures in the arts: *THE LEMON TABLE* contains stories about Turgenev and Sibelius; Sarah Bernhart and the photographer Nadar play major roles in *LEVELS OF LIFE*; Flaubert gets a whole

novel to himself (almost) in *FLAUBERT'S PARROT*; and a meticulous analysis of Géricault's painting "The Raft of the Medusa" forms the centerpiece of his *HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN 10 CHAPTERS*. That essay is reprinted here, slightly expanded. It forms the beginning of a sequence of pieces on French-speaking artists of the 19th and 20th centuries -- Géricault, Delacroix, Courbet, Manet, Fantin-Latour, Cézanne, Degas, Redon, Bonnard, Vuillard, Vallotton, Braque, and Magritte -- followed by a few moderns: Claes Oldenburg, Lucian Freud, and Howard Hodgkin. I am finding it utterly addictive. As a novelist, Barnes has an eye for the telling personal detail: Delacroix in a daze walking home to a house he had moved out of two years earlier; Courbet drinking himself into obesity and death; Cézanne losing his temper with a fidgety sitter. He compares Courbet to Fantin-Latour in terms of their portrayals of the community of artists, and Degas to Bonnard in terms of their attitudes to women; his entry into the proto-Surrealist work of Redon is the question of whether it matters if an artist is married. Litterateur that he is, Barnes also has an ear for what other writers have said about these artists: Maxime Du Camp describing Delacroix sorting skeins of wool; Baudelaire telling Manet "you are only the first in the degeneration of your art

Julian Barnes really does keep an eye open on art, and he is a pleasure to read. And a relief too: he doesn't shower you with explanations and theories as so many art critics do, he tells it how he sees it, not mincing his words. He reminds us that Flaubert thought that "it was impossible to explain one art form in terms of another" and that "great paintings required no words of explanation". True, but there is still work to do for a writer and art lover like Barnes. He gives us a sense of the evolution of art, his essays are pinpointing markers if you will, to help determine "good" art (likely to be meaningful to future generations) from "bad art" (momentarily popular, soon to be forgotten). What I find particularly intriguing is his personal list of artists that will endure the challenge of time, marking their century: "When the future looks back at the second half of the twentieth century in Britain, it will surely see it as a period dominated by painters: Bacon, Freud, Hockney, Hodgkin, Riley (and Caulfield, Auerbach, Hitchens, Aitchinson, Uglow). My only regret is that Barnes did not spread his net wider, to include, say, American or German painters of the same period. But at least his position vis a vis contemporary art is both coherent and sensible...

I've been a Barnes fan since *Flaubert's Parrot* came out. If I really like an author I send copies to friends. Barnes is my top gift author. His literary depth is brilliant with any genre or style he tackles. He weaves his considerable artful style into all his work. These essays should encourage everyone

to pay attention to pictures. As a devoted Kindle reader, I enjoy reading Barnes more now because his generosity with language is immediately and thoroughly accessible. I usually got peeved at authors who tossed "foreign," obscure and classical language around like peanuts to squirrels.

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