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Larry Silver, *Art and Dis-illusion in the Long Sixteenth Century (Brill's Studies on Art, Art History, and Intellectual History, 66)*, Leiden, Brill, 2023, 395 p., ISBN 978-90-04-50429-5

Oliver KIK

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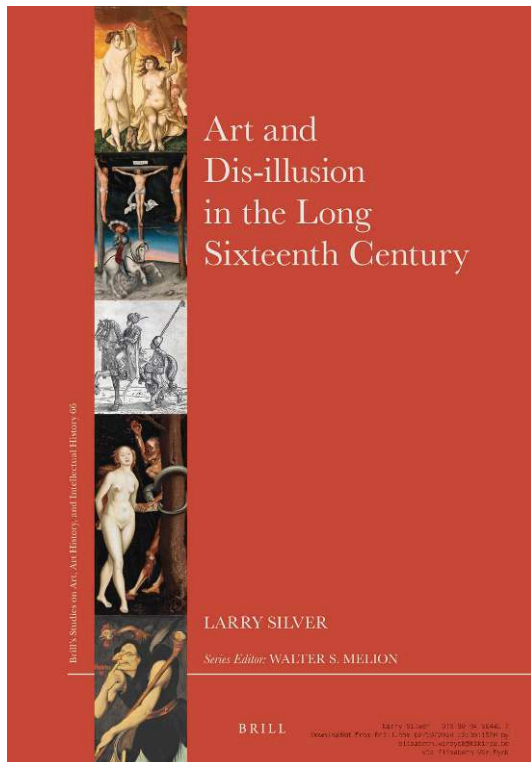
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## REFERENCES

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- 1 Death, disease, war and famine. These are the famous horsemen of the Apocalypse, immortalised in Dürer's 1498 woodcut and are also some of the main themes touched upon by Larry Silver in his latest book. It seems most fitting that in times of catastrophic news and media coverage on climate change, international conflicts and the re-emergence of global pandemics, Silver's latest book focuses on the cataclysmic and dramatic changes that took place during the sixteenth century and how they impacted and defined northern Renaissance art. He argues that the great cultural and scientific accomplishments so often associated with our Burckhardtian idea of Renaissance concurred with great disarray, turmoil, and a loss of order allowing for 'a darker vision' (p. 3) on this critical period.
- 2 Silver begins his analysis Holbein's famous *The Ambassadors*. While mentioning the familiar dichotomy between cultural and scientific display of objects within the iconographical framework of the Vanitas image, Silver goes one step further in adding another layer of significance by interpreting it as a picture of 'discord and broken harmony'. The famed anamorphic skull on the floor casts doubt on the reliability of perception itself and the entire process of vision' (p. 14). As such, the book's title is not only a clever pun on Gombrich's classic study, but also works as a comment on how the distortion of visual imagery functioned as a reflection of the disturbance in society. Many similar analysis' follow in which works of art function as cultural commentators on the de-fractured or splintered state of the early modern society as a whole. Hieronymus Bosh (chapter 2) is presented as a harbinger of a new mode of representing the sinful, desire-filled early modern world. This approach forever shattered a previously more harmonious world view. Silver further explores the impact of the Reformation on art as a communicative propaganda tool, focussing on Luther and Cranach's Wittenberg (chapter 3). Interestingly, Silver widens his scope as he also includes the impact of new religious Calvinist thinking on the emergence of Old

Testament iconography in Netherlandish art, such as Lucas Van Leyden, or Maarten van Heemskerck.

- 3 A dominant theme in Silver's book is the combined appeal and fear of the strange and foreign. Within European society the growing fascination for witchcraft, physical deformations and the devil (chapter 4), is a novel subject matter introduced in German (e.g. Dürer, Hans Baldung) and Netherlandish (e.g. Bosch, Van Oostanen, Bruegel) art which also represents the loss of order. Silver finds the play with illusion key to understanding and contextualizing these images. The close northern European attention to human folly marks a turning point in the interest in the self and the oddness within oneself as explored in chapter 8. Fear and fascination for the foreign and strange is also a recurrent theme in northern European art when artists looked beyond the familiar borders, such as the developing imagery of the Ottoman Turks (chapter 6) in a time span ranging from the Master of the Amsterdam Cabinet to Melchior Lorck, holding a tension between propagandistic, stereotypical imagery (e.g. Dürer) and an almost anthropological recording of exotic costumes and behaviours (e.g. Coecke van Aelst or Lorck). The same ambiguity, between assertion of European superiority and a fascination for the 'strangeness' is noticed in imagery emerging on the New World (chapter 7). The book ends with an insightful chapter (9) on Bruegel's art where the concept of vision and the balance between seeing and hiding is thus conveyed through a viewing process as a kind of scepticism and enforced humility (p. 287).
- 4 In order convey his message one could argue that Silver perhaps constructs up too large a contrast between 'a formerly united European Christendom' and a period of turmoil and religious reform in the sixteenth century, too easily downplaying the cultural impact of previous major schisms and instability. Although the Great Chism of 1054 is briefly mentioned, the Western Schism with the papacy of Avignon, which had only ended in 1418, goes unmentioned. Nevertheless, the range of turmoil and changes occurring during the long sixteenth century had a profound impact on the developments of genres and iconography which can rightly be considered as a crucial paradigm shift. Silver's writing is a pleasure to read as he easily meanders between well-chosen Netherlandish and German examples, and allows for a dialogue with contemporary literary examples. Many of argument and point can be found in previous literature on genre painting, art and Reformation, Erasmian ideas on human folly, or the encounters between Western and 'foreign' cultures, not in the least in the author's own experienced scholarship, yet the book's strength lies in how these elements are combined and synthesized to render a new story. Seamlessly sowing all these research threads together, Silver created a fascinating new narrative, offering a fresh reading of northern European art from Dürer to Callot, which can inform both the well-informed scholar as well as the student unfamiliar to the period.