

Stokstad's tour de force

KU Professor Marilyn Stokstad's voluminous, 10 years-in-the-making 'Art History' is drawing critical raves and a surprisingly broad audience.

By **CHUCK BERG**
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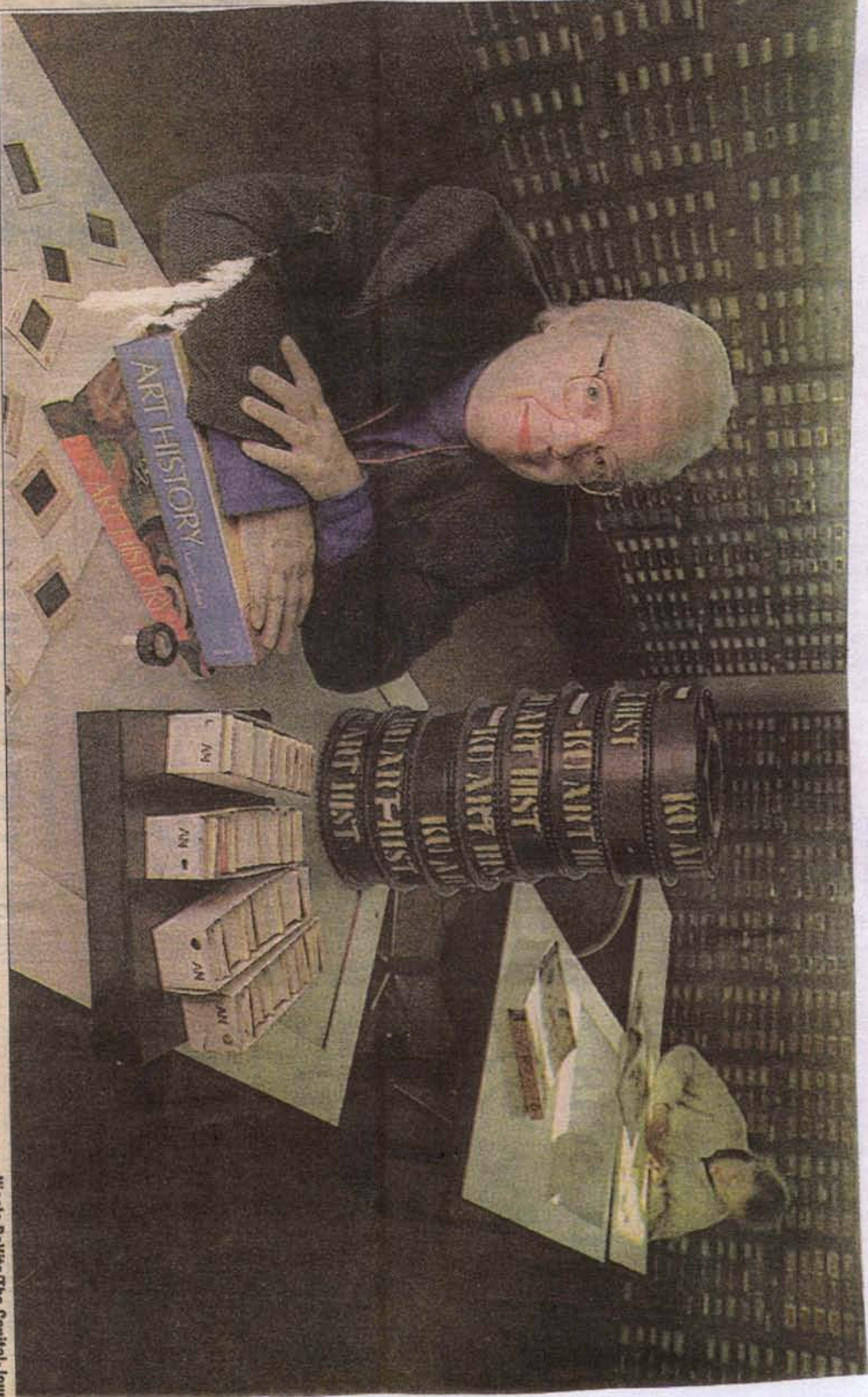
It's not often a humanities professor jumps from the classroom to national celebrity. But with the 1996 publication of "Art History," Marilyn Stokstad, Kansas University's Judith Harris Murphy Distinguished

Professor of Art History, has

become an academic star. Indeed, the avalanche of raves for her massive yet reader-friendly tome has become the talk of the publishing world. Last June, the "buzz" became a roar: when the genial Stokstad was profiled for an extended feature on the nationally televised "CBS Sunday Morning."

How could a college text create such a stir? First, it's the only new survey of art to be published in over two decades. It also bears the imprimatur of the world's most prestigious art book publisher, Harry N. Abrams of New York.

Most important, "Art History" is a compelling and up-to-date "read," lavishly illustrated, lively, and, in spite of its 1,224 pages, a volume that once opened is hard to put down.



Professor Marilyn Stokstad has written, with the help of several contributors, the first new survey of art to be published in over two decades, the 1,224-page "Art History."

—Nicole DeVito/The Capital-Journal

Sitting at a large desk in her comfortably cluttered office at KU's Spencer Museum of Art, the down-to-earth yet erudite Stokstad expressed bemusement at the book's success.

"It's been a little unreal," she said, "especially in view of how well it's done as a trade book."

For the uninitiated, the "trade" sector of the publishing world deals with books sold to the general public by chains like Barnes & Noble as well as by small, independent book-sellers. In contrast to the "trade" market, the "text" part of the business produces books sold almost exclusively through college book-stores.

In the case of Stokstad's work, Abrams publishes the hardcover "trade" edition while Prentice-Hall, the country's largest college publisher, markets the paperback "text." It's an arrangement that's helped make Stokstad's "Art History" one of a handful of textbooks to successfully crossover and "chart" in both the trade and text sides of the business.

Stokstad, who joined KU's art faculty in 1958 after earning a doctorate in art history at the University of Michigan, was recruited about 10 years ago to write the book by a Prentice-Hall sales agent.

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Given her national visibility as a scholar with a specialization in medieval art and a term as president of the College Art Association, Stokstad, with her vast experience in

teaching the introductory survey course, was an ideal choice.

"At first, I turned them down because I was involved with my own research. But they kept saying that they were looking for a Midwestern woman with high name recognition. Anyway, I finally said 'yes,' thinking that it would take about three years" to write.

"Well, it took much longer than that because I hadn't realized that when you sign on for something like this, you give up a good deal of control because you're part of a huge publishing combine. Also, I didn't know about the power of editors in the commercial publishing world.

"My first editor was somewhat conservative and wanted something like Janson's standard survey," a candid Stokstad shared. "I wasn't terribly comfortable with that but produced what the editor thought she wanted. I thought it was boring. When I was assigned a new editor, Julia Moore, things clicked from the start since we both wanted a genuinely modern book."

When asked about what was missing from the first draft, Stokstad replied, "It wasn't so much a matter of adding as subtracting. The first draft was too much like the old surveys in that it was really a long personal essay with illustrations.

"I knew that for the modern TV generation, pages and pages of uninterrupted text wasn't exactly appealing. And so we added many more reproductions, explanatory boxes, extended captions, time lines, things like that. At the same time, while telling the stories of individual periods, we wanted to make sure there was an overarching narrative."

Queried about the five guest contributors such as Chu-tsing Li, professor emeritus at KU, Stokstad said "single authorship of a work aiming to be comprehensive is no longer credible. The world is just too complex. While the larger vision, one might say, is mine, contributions such as Professor Li's section on Chinese art have added substantial breadth."

Another asset is Stokstad's inclu-

sion of so many new artists. "The old surveys were 'updated' by inserting a sentence or paragraph here and there. From the beginning, I was determined to get more information by and about women and minorities."

In "Art History," one can read about and study works by photographer Diane Arbus as well as by Henri Cartier-Bresson. Similarly, one can peruse the graffiti art of Jean-Michel Basquiat, as well as the pop art iconography of Andy Warhol.

Stokstad, although born and raised in Lansing, Mich., is a virtual Kansan. Her comprehensive "Art History" betrays the deep affection for her adopted home through her selection of Vincent van Gogh's "Sunflowers" (1888) for the front cover of the dust jacket. Another homage to the Sunflower State is her inclusion of John Steuart Curry's "Baptism in Kansas" (1928).

Though proud of her accomplishment, Stokstad is the book's most

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Stokstad

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severe critic.

"Sometimes it's obvious where things were cut, so it's not perfect by any means. But it's a job that I'm reasonably proud of. And now that we're working on a revised edition, some of the 'oddities' should eventually get straightened out."

Such self-deprecation should be seen in light of the critical reaction. "Publishers Weekly" got it right when it predicted "Art History" was destined to become a modern classic. It's a status Stokstad's book is likely to enjoy well beyond the turn of the century.

Aside from the huge cost of producing such a complex and comprehensive work, "Art History" more than fills a two-decade-old void. Its lively layout, superb illustrations and readable prose has made it uniquely appealing to students, the public and, indeed, to art scholars.

In fact, "Art History" more than meets Stokstad's goal of making a book that is "a joy to read and use." Indeed, in its vivid and far-reaching coverage of everything from prehistoric cave paintings to postmodern appropriation, reviewers have said "Art History" itself can be seen as a work of art.