

# Stokstad invigorates art history with its first major text in 22 years

Marilyn Stokstad didn't take offense last fall when a friend suggested she had turned the New York Times of art history textbooks into USA Today.

How could she be upset by such an analogy when it spoke precisely to her intentions?

Her book, *Art History*, the first major art history textbook published in 22 years, indeed veers widely from the staid standard in the field, *History of Art* by H.W. Janson. Stokstad, a faculty member since 1958, wanted her book to avoid elitism and create a thorough survey, serious in its scholarship yet fun in its delivery. She wanted students, scholars and art lovers to have a distinctively different choice, a user-friendly resource that still brims with information, and that's the enviable accomplishment of *Art History*, published by Prentice-Hall and Abrams.

Stokstad began work on the book in 1988 and spent seven years juggling it between her duties as Judith Harris Murphy distinguished professor of art and senior curator of the Spencer Art Museum. The writing consumed her evenings, weekends, vacations, a leave without pay and a sabbatical. "I think it may be worth it," she says, "but we'll have to see."

So far, the investment appears to be a master brushstroke. The publisher projects that Stokstad will capture 35 percent of the textbook market and already has her at work on a second edition.

Reviewers have raved: Publishers Weekly in January designated it a book of unusual interest and

merit and gushed, "Destined to establish itself as a modern classic, this hugely informative, wholly enjoyable global history of art from prehistoric times to the present views art as a fundamental, inextricable vehicle for the human spirit...Few texts so wide-rangingly connect the artistic output of each period to the artists' lives, sources of funding and historical, social and political context."

Stokstad's tome tips the scales at just over seven pounds, but then pouring 30,000 years of art into a single book is no featherweight task. The text is split

into two paperbacks for art history surveys, but the exquisite hardback version retails for \$60, a reasonable price for the compelling stories contained in its 1,167 pages.

The 29 chapters focus on Western visual art and architecture but also give extensive consideration to Islamic, Japanese, Chinese, Indian, African and Pacific cultures. Five chapters are written by Stokstad's colleagues, including Chu-ting Li, KU professor emeritus, and Stephen Addiss, a former KU faculty member now at Richmond University. The book pre-

sents 29 maps, 29 timelines and a whopping 1,625 illustrations—761 of them in color. The timelines are especially helpful because they show parallel developments across cultures and civilizations.

Students today don't read as much as in the past but are more visually sophisticated, Stokstad explains, so the content and design cater to their tastes by blending text, pictures, maps and timelines with what Stokstad calls "fun facts and all the kinds of things that make art history an interesting subject, not just a holier-than-thou, pompous kind of story."

Another aspect that set Stokstad's work apart is her choice of artwork. For instance, the Bayeux Tapestry, which documents events surrounding the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, depicts battle, death and gore in its 50 surviving scenes. Stokstad elected to show "Bishop Odo Blessing the Feast"—a decidedly non-violent panel that still properly displays the tapestry's intricate handwork.

"If you look at previous art history books," she says, "they're filled with art that depicts war, rape and

the hunting of animals. I tried to avoid that as much as possible." She also writes in the book that recent research suggests the embroiderers of the Bayeux Tapestry were women. "All of these things you may take for granted, but when I was taking art history these things were never mentioned," Stokstad says. "'Anonymous' truly was a woman."

Stokstad stresses the book is not a feminist diatribe but rather that it reveals women to be more than merely "the subject of the male gaze." She delineates the contributions of women artists and patrons, whose work more often than not has been ignored.

She also was careful to select art from a variety of sources around the globe. In the United States she didn't only use major museums.

"One does not have to live in a major population center to experience wonderful art," Stokstad writes in the introduction, then proves her point by mentioning that of the 26 works illustrated in the chapter, 11 are located near the author in Kansas and Missouri, and four are in a single university museum (Spencer).

The hardback edition features Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" on the cover, a choice of the publisher that Stokstad first resisted before realizing the visual pun.

"I can tell you, when it suddenly dawns on people—and sometimes it doesn't—they feel so smug to have cracked the code," she says with a smile. "It's a book by a Kansas author, but a lot of people don't know that the Sunflower is the state flower.

"So you can't claim I'm not loyal."

WALLY EYERSON



**PROFESSOR AND PATRON:** Stokstad has established an endowment to which she will contribute royalties from her textbook sales and award a prize for KU students "who have made an outstanding contribution to the teaching of art history."