

Review of Incendiary Art: The Representation of Fireworks in Early Modern Europe

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Bibliographies & Dossiers, Getty Research Institute
for the History of Art and the Humanities (1999)
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This is a richly documented paperback book, one of the series called Bibliographies & Dossiers from the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, documenting an exhibit held at the Institute in 1999. It contains 53 black and white engravings and 23 color plates, and the time period covered is from the late 1500s to the early 1800s, although the text itself is not chronological. This work is more concerned with the objects as pieces of art and their use as historical records, rather than using them to describe the fireworks themselves. Each of the figures is described in detail, with heavy emphasis on the political, social, and cultural meanings that are represented in the scene. Historical facts are presented, explaining why the displays were originally staged. Many of the details of the displays were obtained from written programs that were distributed to the audience so that they could fully appreciate both the significance of the production and the work involved.

The book consists of two sections; The Culture of Fireworks, and Fireworks and the Sublime. Unfortunately, these titles are as abstract as many of the descriptions themselves. The

writing style is academic in the extreme. An example from the first few pages will illustrate the point:

The narrative and iconic strategies adopted by artists to illustrate fireworks constitute a kind of pictorial lexicon consisting of a highly heterogeneous vocabulary of idioms and dialects diverging morphologically according to time and place.

The artists use a variety of techniques in an attempt to portray the event. In some cases, the entire display, which may have lasted for hours, is condensed into a single frame. Due to limitations of the time, most works were black and white engravings, with only a few color reproductions included. Not all of the referenced figures were produced by artists actually in attendance, as some were done for promotional purposes prior to the event. Others were reproduced long afterwards as “historical” records.

Thorough reading brings up some interesting points, some of which are as relevant today as they were in the 16th century. Expenses were a concern, even to the royalty that usually staged the shows, as several months of effort could be involved in constructing machines—the structure and stage of the display. Some pyrotechnicians put on demonstrations to perfect their techniques, but most of the displays were used to celebrate victories in war, using the obvious similarity of fireworks with warfare. Weddings, coronations, and royal birthdays were also occasions for celebration, where representations of volcanoes were common.

This is definitely not a casual read, but the enthusiasm of the author for his subject is evident, as in these statements near the end of the book:

We are left, in the end, with the images themselves, ironically static emblems of the perpetually disintegrating. And the visual records are, inevitably, no more than pale reflections of their subjects.