



Civilisation

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Art

Civilisation Details

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before, and yet after 12 episodes of architecture that would make you weep, paintings that cannot but leave you dazed and spinning, it is hard to look at ‘the best of the modern world’ and not think, “Is this really the best we can do?”

I guess painting church ceilings for twenty-years wasn’t really efficient – and we all know how terribly important it is to be efficient.

I think this could well have been better if it was purely a history of art and therefore sought to present that history by explaining more of what the artists were seeking to do and why. For example, what were the technological and scientific prerequisites that made point perspective painting possible? How did such painting change the way we saw space? What is the relationship between symbolic representation and naturalistic representation and to what extent are these contradictory? How did the invention of oil paints or access to various pigments affect what and how things were painted? How did the black-death impact on the history of art and literature – beyond say Petrarch and Laura?

Let me give you a better example. I’m reading his *The Nude* at the moment – or rather, I was reading it and have been distracted with other things. In it he says that architecture – particularly Classical architecture – is premised on the same proportions as the human body. The columns are the legs, the ceiling is the shoulders. But, as much as I like this idea, he never explains it in a way I can really understand. And he says the same is true of Gothic architecture, but this left me even more confused. I think I would need a diagram – I think I would need numbers. Anyway, I certainly need more – he tantalizes, where he should explain. I would love to see a program that really did relate the arts – music, painting, sculpture, crafts and so on – from each period showing the common features of each art form and the striking differences. You know, in something like the way Foucault does with economics, biology and linguistics in *The Order of Things*. That is, a history of art that expresses what the artists were seeking to say, and seeking to show in their art. A history of art as if it was done by that other BBC presenter of personal views – James Burke – with his *Connections* or *The Day the Universe Changed* - perhaps my two all-time favourite documentaries.

But this was meant as a very expensive chocolate box, or jewellery box and it is certainly that – like I said, it is sumptuous. I wonder why we don’t make more documentaries like this anymore? Are people really not interested?

Roy Lotz says

I wonder if a single thought that has helped forward the human spirit has ever been conceived or written down in an enormous room

I must admit immediately that I have never read nor even laid eyes on this book. I’m sure it’s lovely. This review is, rather, about the television series, which I’d wager is twice as lovely.

Civilisation is the best documentary I’ve ever seen. Kenneth Clark takes his viewer from the Dark Ages, through romanesque, gothic, the Renaissance, the Reformation, baroque, rococo, neoclassicism, impressionism, through the industrial revolution and the two World Wars, all the way up to when the program was made in the late 1960s. This is a remarkable amount of ground to cover for a show with 13 episodes, each 50 minutes long.

Not only chronologically, but in subject matter, this documentary casts a wide net. Although the show's primary emphasis is on architecture and art, Clark also dips into literature, poetry, music, engineering, politics, and wider social problems like inequality, poverty, oppression, and war. Of course, for lack of time Clark cannot delve too deeply into any one of these subjects; but because the presentation is so skillful and economical, and the selection of material so tasteful, the viewer is nevertheless satisfied at the end of every episode.

The documentary generally shifts between shots of Clark facing the camera, talking to the viewer, and extended, panoramic shots of churches, monuments, paintings, drawings, sculptures, and mountains, while beautiful music plays in the background. Clark himself chose the musical accompaniments to these visuals, and they are uniformly splendid (and this is one reason why I recommend the documentary over the book). More than perhaps anything I've seen on a screen, this series is rich, lavish, sumptuous. As the camera pans over the altarpiece of a church, while Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion* plays in the background, it's so lush and gorgeous that it almost gives you a stomach ache.

Aside from these visuals and music, the main attraction of the series is Clark himself. He comes across as refined, cosmopolitan—almost a freak of erudition. But for all that, he is charming and witty, if ultimately a bit cold. One of the strongest impressions I got was that Clark was a man from another time. He looks out of place as he walks through the modern streets, crowded with cars and buzzing with urban life. He has many misgivings about the modern world: he is anti-Marxist, anti-modern art, and certainly didn't understand the student protests and hippie culture flourishing at the time. In his own words, he was a “stick in the mud,” and I think felt alienated from his time because of his intense appreciation, even worship, of Western art.

This brings me to some of this program's shortcomings. Most of these are due to the time in which it was made. This is most apparent in the first episode, “The Skin of Our Teeth,” wherein he argues that civilization almost disappeared during the Dark Ages, and comes close to crediting Charlemagne as the savior of all subsequent culture. This requires that he completely discredit both Byzantine and Muslim culture (not to mention Chinese), both of which were doing just fine. He repeats the tired stereotype about Byzantium being a fossilized culture and treats the Muslims as simple destroyers. Later on in the series, he has some uncharitable things to say about the Germans, which I think was a product of growing up during the World War.

A more serious flaw might be that the series bites off more than it can chew. The questions Clark poses to answer are vast. What is civilization? What makes it thrive? What makes it fall apart? Deep questions, but his answers are by comparison shallow. Civilization requires confidence in the future; they cannot be built on fear. Civilization requires rebirth, the constant search for new styles and ideas; but it also requires continuity and tradition, a respect for the past. Civilization is pushed forward by men of genius (and in this series, they're all men), who enlarge our faculties with their godlike creative powers; men like Michelangelo, Dante, Beethoven, men who are timeless and yet who forever alter the face of culture.

These are interesting answers, but they seem rather superficial to me. They describe, rather than explain, civilization. But of course, this is a documentary, not a monograph. And although Clark asks and tries to answer many questions, I think his primary goal was simply to inspire a sense of the worth, the preciousness, the grandeur of the accomplishments of European civilization. He wants to remind his viewers that our culture is fragile, and that we owe to it not only beautiful paintings and poetry, but also our very ability to see and appreciate the beauty in certain ways, to think about ideas in a certain light, to live not only a happy but a full and rich life.

Maybe this seems pinched and old-fashioned nowadays. Still, I can't help thinking of all the times that a friend, a fellow student, or even a teacher has made a blanket statement about “Western culture,” “Enlightenment ideas,” “scientific materialism,” or some such thing, while seeming to understand none of it. (I've probably done this myself, too.) I've been in classes—serious, graduate-level classes—where, amid

condemnations of “Western” ideas and gratuitous namedropping of Western philosophers, I realized that I was the only person there, professor included, who actually read some of these authors. I’m not making this up.

I suppose this is just a callow intellectual fashion, and it will eventually pass away. And I also suppose that this might be slightly preferable to the idiotic self-glorification of “European man” that prevailed in earlier times. At present, however, this program is a wonderful corrective to our bad habits of thought. It’s an education, a social critique, and a joy. I hope you get a chance to watch it.

Brian Gatz says

God, if this were newer...Here's an incredible survey of what happened in art, philosophy, and (most importantly) architecture from ~1000-1915. It's not entirely optimistic, but looks up enough. Paths, rights, and wrongs don't much play into it. We're creating piles of architecture, sweet paintings, effortless sculpture- -or we're graceful in proportion, famed in ideas, moderate in wealth, and subtle in human appreciation. If there's a pattern, it's cyclical, short, and ecstatic. Some of the best pieces give the age of the spirit, others directly contradict (or, better, ignore the impulse to comment on the political, social hum). Small recommendations to the restless Germans (esp. Rococo), much to be said for the delicacies of the Italian Renaissance, and the natural wonders of Rousseau and the Romantics. I couldn't possibly summarize. There's so very much out there, have we the confidence to match it?

Carol Tensen says

I picked this up at a thrift shop because I didn't see the BBC series back in the late sixties. I was always attracted to the image of Charlemagne on the cover. This being a series of essays rather than a linear history of art and civilization, Clark leads us through the development of Western Europe through some interesting generalizations: that craft (text illumination, decoration, reliquaries) led to art and architecture during the middle ages; that the age of reason eventually led to a "Worship of Nature"; that the Industrial Age had the potential to be as destructive to civilization as the Huns. He trashed the Protestant Reformation so roundly (I believe he refers to innate Teutonic ferocity) that Francis Schaeffer felt the need to film "How Shall We Then Live?" as a counterargument.

Since this was not a comprehensive art history text, Clark featured specific artists. I appreciated the fact he featured Riemenschneider, Holbein, Bernini, and Watteau (who never seem to get their just recognition - especially in a world where the books about artists like Holbein are insanely outnumbered by books about any of the Impressionists). Two comments about the illustrations: First off, thank God for google images. Some art should never ever be shown as a fragment. Courbet's "Funeral at Ornans" is a case in point. Secondly, I've always felt that captions for artwork should include date and location in addition to artist and title. How hard is that?

I rate this book very high brow and definitely redolent of tweed and fine leather.

Anton says

This weekend I have indulged myself with a visit to Hatchard's Piccadilly, London's oldest bookstore. For those who haven't been there yet - I strongly recommend you do next time you are in the city! It is a fabulous place. A bookstore as the bookstores were meant to be. Full of charm, treasures to be found and quirky intelligent staff. Perhaps it is not where one goes bargain-hunting, but their selection is superb. Most of the new releases available 'signed by the author' and they are also offering a marvellous selection of the first editions...

It turned out that Hatchard's just released a limited hardback edition of 'Civilization' by Sir Kenneth Clark. It is hailed as best non-fiction book in the store's 220-year history. Well, this was an easy decision on an early Xmas gift to self.

I think this is a wonderful way for physical stores to differentiate and stay relevant under stress of online competition. Win customers through the unique experience and their intrinsic character.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Nick Gibson says

Kenneth Clark was a mixed bag. On the one hand he believed in many sensible things: that society needs institutions, order is better than chaos, creation is better than destruction, and in sympathy over ideology, knowledge over ignorance, gentleness over violence, and forgiveness over vendetta. He believed in a need to learn from history. He believed in a basic lack of change in human nature over millennia.

These are the observations of a sober and honest man.

He also correctly predicted from what quarter the coming destruction would come. Clark feared Western cynicism and disillusionment - what Roger Scruton has called the "culture of repudiation". We are seeing the throes of that force today.

What Clark missed was the solution. He thought it lay in the renewal of the Center, as if society was being pulled apart by two extreme sides: one with too many convictions, the other with none. The reality is that the Foundation is giving way from beneath Western civilization, as he documents here in a largely neutral tone - as if the imprisonment of mankind in the cage of materialism had no relation to the explosion of barbarities in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Kenneth Clark was a fatherly old humanist with an appreciation of the Divine. He was convinced that there was something more to reality than materialism. He followed the scent of the Imago Dei in man, not to orthodoxy but to an appreciation of the existence of God and the need for society to account for the full range of the human condition - sinful and spiritual.

As such he's well worth reading. You can learn a lot, as long as you're on your guard to the subtle deceptions of his humanism. (The same for Scruton, and others.) Clark observes much and appreciates much and says many wise things, but his attempt to integrate all this data in humanity instead of God is a grave error.

With your philosophical guard up, the 'Civilisation' book and thirteen-part BBC series (watch it on YouTube) are fantastic. Clark is incredibly charismatic with his dry humor, unflappable demeanor, and twinkling eyes. His selection of music, poetry, architecture, and painting are cohesive. His knowledge is extensive. He doesn't talk down to you, either. Yes, he repeats a few now-exploded ideas that were common to the time - about the Dark Ages, the supposed oppression of Victorian industrial England, etc - so perhaps a bit of knowledge going in would be good to have. But these are trifling.

I recommend the BBC show for the full effect. There are sections absolutely brimming with the exhilaration of cultural confidence. It will make you proud of the West and human achievement like never before - delirious with the inexpressible grandeur of imperial architecture and individual creative expression. You will reel under the fusion of genius with genius, beauty with beauty, sublimity with sublimity.

And that is a poison, unless cut with the Waters of Life.

Dat says

A splendid walk through the museum of Western civilisation, covering primarily its architecture and its paintings since the Dark Ages, but also touching on music and literature, with a highly educated and worldly tour guide. Kenneth Clark holds up art as a mirror to Western society, a reflection of its concerns, ideas and most intense feelings. Although the author is careful to note that art does not necessarily imitate life (perhaps, the opposite is true), his narrative draws clear links from great works of art to the social conditions of their creators -- take, for instance, Michelangelo's David and Renaissance's utmost faith in human greatness or Byron's poetry and the disillusioned Europe following the fall of the Bastille.

What makes the book enthralling is that it is unapologetically individualistic and unashamedly opinionated. Kenneth Clark does not shy away from praising one artist above the rest, from labelling certain individuals and their thought as mediocre, from interpreting historical movements and relating them to successes and failures of post-WWII society. You may not agree with the author's views, but you will not be reading a dry encyclopedia. At its heart, the book promotes the great man theory (and indeed, the book is almost exclusively about great white men) of history and of art: great historical events and great works of art occur due to a handful of singular, extraordinarily gifted individuals who, though born of, transcend their society and their time. To live in a civilised society is to allow such individuals to foster and realise their talents. Is that so? Well, whether right or wrong, it does not detract from the book. To read Civilisation is to indulge in one thoughtful man's perspective on the history of the Western world, as told by its great art.

Erik Graff says

Kenneth Clark was an historian of art who wrote and narrated the first color BBC documentary, Civilisation, and produced a lavishly illustrated book along the same lines. The film was shown at Grinnell College during my freshman year. Thereafter I picked up the book.

Both book and documentary are not so much histories of art as they are histories of (primarily western) civilization earmarked to great and illustrative works of art.

Grinnell College is not the place to go if one enjoys the splendors of nature. It is surrounded by corn, alfalfa and soy fields. Grinnell is not the place to go if one enjoys the night life and distractions of cities. The town itself is small with virtually no night life. Grinnell is a good place to study because there is little else to do there. Our work, however, was punctuated every weekend by films presented in the Alumni Recitation Hall, films of generally of high quality, films like Clark's Civilisation.

Alins says

I first saw this series when it was released by the BBC to Public Television over thirty years ago, and would beg my local station, WHYY, to keep running it until their money ran out. Why? Quite simply, to my mind, it is the most superior series ever seen on television, public or not. Lord Clark was not only brilliant, witty and engaging, but he was a teacher and, surprisingly, a most charming television presence. He has become my lifetime companion, and if this series ever comes out on DVD, I will buy it again. Also, were it not for this groundbreaking series, we would never have seen its many imitators - The Ascent of Man, America, Cosmos, Life on Earth, The Living Planet. Need I go on? Do not wait for this video to become unavailable. For anyone with a need to know about the visual arts, history, music and how they all should share space in our lives, let this program be your companion as well.

Vladimir says

A companion book to a TV show that ran on BBC2 in the '70s. It covers Western European 'civilisation' from the Early Middle Ages to the 19th century, mostly through art and architecture. Lightweight but recommended for its humanizing anecdotes about figures like Abbot Suger, Erasmus, and Descartes, and for the author's amusingly patrician, pompous, very English style.

Marc says

This book is more than 50 years old, and only the paper version of a BBC-TV-series. As a young man I saw some parts of it and was very impressed by the erudition of Clark and his strong vision. So many years later, that vision obviously is very outdated; the narrow Western focus today would be completely out of the question; moreover, Clark did not venture into the twentieth century art, though we do have the impression that he has a not so flattering opinion about it. Some of his remarks, we would be ashamed of today (about the urge of Germans for hysteria, for example). But still, it remains quite impressive to get all the different art genres in one comprehensive vision. Moreover, it was nice to see how Clark approaches the concept of "civilization" very cautiously and does not give a simple definition. Finally, I want to repeat his closing lines, a creed that still stands: "I believe order is better than chaos, creation better than destruction. I prefer gentleness to violence, forgiveness to vendetta. On the whole I think that knowledge is preferable to ignorance, and I am sure that human sympathy is more valuable than ideology. I believe that in spite of the recent triumphs of science, men haven't changed much in the last two thousand years; and in consequence we must try to learn from history "

Amen!

Jeff Howells says

As the updated series is currently on TV, this is a good time to read the book that accompanied Kenneth Clarke's original documentary 'Civilisation' back in 1969. I watched it several years ago and loved it. The book is essentially Clarke's narrative stripped of all the luscious visuals and music.

It's interesting to compare Clarke's version with this year's modern updating. Clarke's was essentially a chronological wander through the history of Western art & architecture. The programmes of Schama, Beard & Olusoga are thematic lectures with a global reach.

That being said there is much to like in Clarke's version - it's certainly a very good starting point for anyone interested in art history.

It's also surprisingly prophetic. He ends the series & the book by quoting Yeats "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity". That could describe 2018, and frankly doesn't it feel as if civilisation as we know it is in grave danger?

John Sutherland says

This book is a fitting companion to the excellent videos of the same name. Kenneth Clark was one of those delightful english gentlemen with an impeccable education, and who use english properly and to whom it is a pleasure to listen, and to watch (other than for seeing his english dentistry). It traces the precarious survival of christian civilization in the last thousand or so years, through the accomplishments of that time that--unlike history--cannot easily lie: its Art; its Books; and its Architecture; all, thanks to the value seen in those things by the Christian Church, one of the few sources of wealth at that time. It is a cornucopia of pleasure in every way, bringing those delights before us that we would otherwise never see, or even know about.

Monica says

About two-thirds of the way through, Clark makes a statement that to me sums up the whole point of the narrative: "[A]lthough one may use works of art to illustrate the history of civilization, one must not pretend that social conditions produce works of art or inevitably influence their form." This is exactly what Clark does: the progress of art is discussed in parallel with the progress in civilization, of which art is simultaneously herald, inspirator, and mirror. At times I feel that Clark does what he claims not to do- he shows how art arises out of social conditions. This is particularly evident in the chapter on the early ages of Western civilization, the 11th to 13th centuries. Perhaps he should not be faulted for doing so, as there is little else left to us as chronicle of the thought of those times.

Overall Clark is a well-read, opinionated, witty (and sometimes naughty) narrator. One cannot help but admire and yearn to espouse his personal belief that civilization cannot have moved forward as it has but for the essential contributions made by persons of genius ("heroes" as he calls them) who are not products of but miracles of society.

I close the last page with an overarching concept of Western civilization and notes for future reading and deeper studies. I recommend this book as an excellent nonfiction "gateway" read for those who mainly read fiction.

Pieter says

Although both the book dates back to 1969, I enjoyed the reading very much. To be honest, I read the book and watched the related DVD-series simultaneously. The DVD offers the opportunity to see also the buildings, pieces of art, paintings to which Sir Kenneth Clark refers. The book covers a history of civilisation covering more than a millenium of European history. Focus is rather on the Low Countries, Italy, Germany, France and the Isles. Little or no attention to Spain and Eastern/ Middle Europe. Although the book is almost 50 years old, it still holds a relevant truth: civilisations fall when they get bored and fearful. The last few decades, decadence and oikophobia (the fear for itself, a word used by the philosopher Roger Scruton) rule over Europe. Yes, oikophobia rather than the politically correct and liberal fetish called xenophobia. Every reader should agree on the concluding comments of Sir Kenneth Clark, that order and gentleness are to be preferred over chaos and violence and one should believe in something greater than human life, call it Nature or God. It is naive to be optimist because Popper requires us to be so, but it would be the greatest failure of our and the next generations to jeopardize this rich European civilisation by being bored or fearful. To quote world's best novel Lord of the Rings: "I bid to stand, men of the West!"

Sasha says

Verbatim of classic TV series where Kenneth Clark discussed civilization of Western Europe from collapse of Roman Europe to recent times.

I am not familiar with original TV program so for me this was the first introduction with Clark and I loved it, his way with words is very classy and he surely and swiftly moves from one subject to another, in fact there were so many interesting side-stories that I started to note everything down for future research, absolutely loved his style and often would re-read certain pages because this was educational and stylish at the same time. Sure, we can read between the lines and understand these opinions come from elderly gentleman of certain background (for example, women are not mentioned at all) but once this was understood, reader have lot to enjoy in here.

Every chapter covers some important innovation, be it in architecture, music, art or simply in change of thinking - Clark mentions Dante, Holbein, Mozart and Voltaire illustrating his stories with funny little anecdotes (H.G. Wells wouldn't dare to drive a car in France, because the temptation to run over a priest would be too strong for him) and there are literary thousands of informations that reader can treasure and savour later.

Some are dead-set against edition without illustrations, well I happened to buy the only available here and it was paperback with not a single illustration and wouldn't you know, it did not make any difference (except that is probably lighter to carry around on my travels than hardback, illustrated version) for me as I love READING, not just looking at pictures. I can read about any subject and find the illustration myself if I want to, we have internet now so everything is available. It reminds me of Alice's question of what's the point of book without pictures, well I am life-long passionate reader and for me the language and the style of the writer is more important than pictures.

This is beautiful, little book that covers centuries of innovations and I absolutely love it.

Whoknew? says

Just don't ask Sir Kenneth about the Spanish....funny how he could present an overview of European art without so much as a word about them. Hmmmm.
