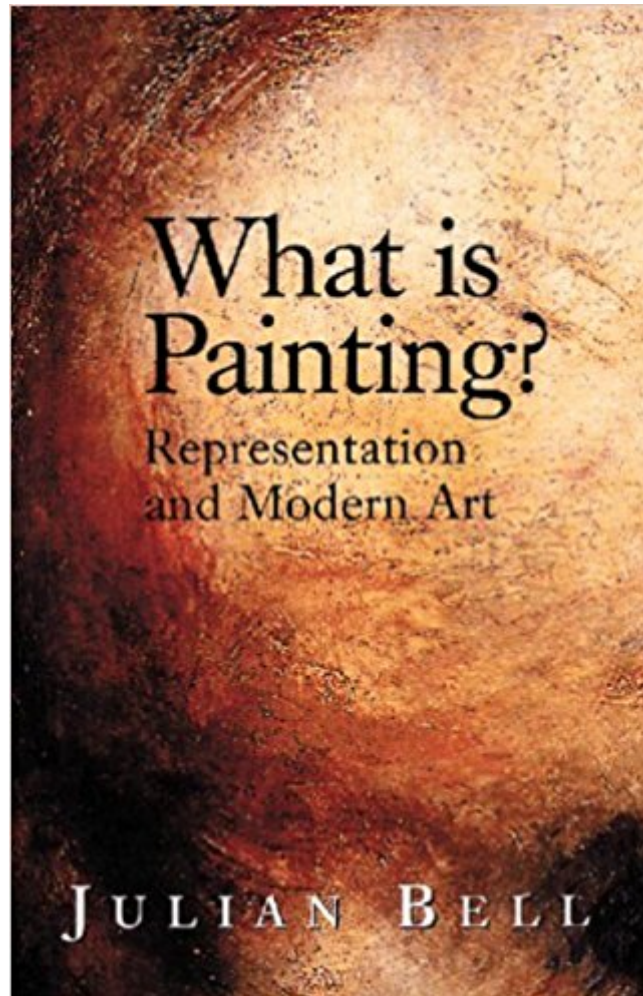




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# What Is Painting?: Representation And Modern Art



## Synopsis

A study and explanation of modern art and the nature of painting

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Julian Bell's refreshingly simple *What Is Painting?* considers, as its title suggests, basic questions relevant to the practice and contemplation of painting. As a successful painter in his own right, it is fascinating to watch Bell's mind cut through the dense foliage of art history to produce a compelling account of the ways in which the personal and social significance of painting has changed over the centuries. Beginning with Aristotle and ending with the so-called death of painting, Bell boldly tackles ideas and concepts central to an understanding of the medium. Imitation, representation, form, modernity, abstraction, and deconstruction are all explored through Bell's accounts of painters ranging from the early Greeks to Lucian Freud. Running throughout the book is a passionate belief in the importance of painting as a means of private and public expression. For a book by a painter, it is rather light on color illustrations (only 16 in all), and the subtlety of Bell's arguments can sometimes diminish their force. Still, a very interesting read for both artists and art lovers. --Jerry Brotton, [.co.uk](#)

A work of refreshing originality. -- E. H. Gombrich  
So vivid in its thinking and so propelled in its narration that I find it difficult to be other than astonished and admiring. -- John Elderfield

Explains what painting is very thoroughly. Learning so much.

I bought this book a while ago, and gave up on its tiny print and badly reproduced pictures. But "needing" the ideas I expect in it, I recently tried again. It is hopeless. So I thought I'd try to find a better edition. It turns out, surprise!!! I had received a "print on demand edition". I NEVER would have "demanded" such a waste. Your information does not distinguish "print on demand" editions from any others.... and no hardback is available. (I supposed a hardback would include the advertised 16 color illustrations, and possibly a larger format.) So now, although other books by Julian Bell may be just what I'm hoping for, there's no way for me to know whether they are cheap reprints or well done versions. Shame on Thames & Hundson, whom I always trusted to be quality publishers. Janet

I've made my senior students breathe this, required reading for painters if not visual artists at large

This is an extremely engaging book written by a rather good English artist (descendent of a long line of famous Bells: Clive, Vanessa, Quentin) who also has an interest in art criticism and history. I recommend checking out his web site at [...] to see some images of his own artworks. Although much of the book covers familiar territory for me, a long-time aesthetics teacher, I found myself re-reading and contemplating many individual paragraphs packed with novel insight. Who would think that in the few paragraphs allotted to Plato's view of the arts the author would actually teach me something new on this topic? I particularly liked the way Bell was able to combine his words and the many art illustrations. Seldom have I experienced an art book in which the two worked so well together. (He says that the text is a "picture book" - but it goes far beyond that.) I also like the variety of images in the text. They include not only old stand-bys but some interesting newcomers (at least, for me), for example a monkey painting by Mao Sung, "A Forest Scene" by Paulos van Vianen, and a detail from an work by Tivadar Csontvary. The juxtapositions of images were also intriguing, for example between the above-mentioned monkey and "Green Monkey" by Stubbs, and between Friedrich's "A Wanderer above the Sea of Fog" and Courbet's "The Stonebreakers." The later pairing is accompanied by a nice discussion of what "realist" means in painting. One of the discussions I most enjoyed was that of the concept of "fun." (200-207) It is unusual for an art theorist to talk about fun and, although Bell's account closely parallels earlier discussions of "kitsch," I agree with him that "fun" is a broader, more important term. It was also refreshing to see a discussion of the term "art" that cuts it down to size. Bell is correct to insist that the word should be taken as an evaluative one implying that what is called art is worth looking at. (This point is usually

wrongly denied by philosophers). He gives a nice history of changes in the meaning of this term and the relation between that and painters' practices. Unfortunately after everything that preceded, the concluding chapter, on "representation" (in which Bell sides with Ernst Gombrich against Nelson Goodman) was something of a disappointment. Perhaps Bell was just trying to pack too much theory into too short compass. The chapter is dominated by three drawings used to explain his overall theory. I did like the image of the museum of art surrounded by the marketplace of fun on page 236, but was puzzled by the image of the painter at work on the same page, and was completely befuddled by the culminating complex diagram representing his entire theory on page 238. He refers to the diagram as "an attempt, by someone used to thinking pictorially, to translate the intellectual tensions of the foregoing argument into manageable visual shape." (239) But what is manageable about a circle divided into the categories "spirit," "death," "mark" and "work," that looks like some sort of theosophical chart of the solar system? Perhaps in a future book Bell could explain this image. This minor glitch (in my view) ultimately does not take away the value of a short book that provided me with many hours pleasure and much food for thought. I recommend it not only for all painters who like to think about their craft but also to all students of the visual arts interested in a relatively easy introduction to the aesthetics of art from the standpoint of a well-read and articulate painter.

I read this book as a class assignment for my BFA painting class. I am very grateful. This book is a wealth of knowledge about topics in ancient and modern philosophies about painting. It is nice to find a book that doesn't try to explain the whole concept of what art is. That is impossible to do in 256 pages because of how the topic of art has spread to encompass many professions in the past century. (Side Note: I once told a group of women I was an artist and they proceeded to ask what instrument I played) This book focuses on one topic which is painting. It is separated into easy to understand chapters and those are broken down into easier to understand sections. My only complaint (and the reason I gave a 4 and not a 5) is that even though it gives a lot of information, it is extremely compact. It is just a little too much for my taste. You will be reading about one topic and it seems to switch to another topic all in the same paragraph. But it is still a great book for information on contemporary painting.

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Maybe my favorite book on painting, along with - ironically? - 'What Painting Is' by James Elkins.

This book gives a fascinating view on art from an author who knows very well what he is talking about. Read it.

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