

PRIVATE VIEW

"SIMON SCHAMA'S POWER OF ART," the title of Schama's blockbuster new series for BBC2, made me think instantly of the bombastic 1980s Frankie Goes to Hollywood hit "The Power of Love": "The power of love / A force from above / Cleaning my soul"—a peerless slice of kitsch neo-romantic pop, propped up by an army of synthesised strings. It would be naive to think that a historian whose academic prowess is matched by his populist instincts hadn't made this reference deliberately, and sure enough, Schama's series is art historical power rock. "Art

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stops us in our tracks with a high voltage jolt of disturbance... it takes us places we had never dreamed of going," he guffs, like a copywriter for an ad for the new BMW. But Schama's televisual sleight-of-hand has always been to be smart while sounding simplistic. His new series is an unashamedly big sell for great art—but it's also erudite, imaginative, scholarly and contemporary.

Schama has picked eight "masterpieces" around which to tell stories of each artist's life and achievements. His selections all have brilliant stories behind them, tales of the artist staking everything on the creation of something that the world has never seen before. Schama's choices are for the most part unconventional and surprising—he doesn't give us any old Turner seascape, but *Slave Ships with Slavers Throwing the Dead and Dying Overboard*; we don't get Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*, but a classical painting for Amsterdam's town hall. This is a history of wayward geniuses, libertine passions, violent tempers, extreme emotions, and ultimate salvation. Bernini sculpts nuns having orgasms; Van Gogh paints his psychoses into his landscapes; Picasso rescues humanity from barbarism with his paintbrush.

In one sense, this is "landmark" arts television as it has always been—a set of lectures by a presenter with some nice pictures attached. That's how they made the BBC's most famous landmark series, *Civilisation*, in 1969. But the similarities with *Civilisation* end there. *Power of Art* is the perfect reformulation of the landmark concept for the contemporary television market, or at least how television executives perceive it. *Civilisation* was a stroll through the big styles of western art; *Power* is a collection of tall tales. Analysis is out; concepts and stories are everything. So Schama doesn't shy away from the kind of sweeping generalisation that television audiences swallow whole, but which would lead to snorts in even the dimmest lecture hall—quite where he got the idea that Van Gogh's *Wheat Field with Crows* is "the first modern work of art" is anyone's guess.

There's not much art history as we know it in the Bernini episode—no description of the baroque, the movement that became synonymous with the artist. Instead, it's the tale of greedy cardinals, busty beauties and a vain artist. But Schama is so good at raunchy plots that it's hard to resist, especially if you know the art history already. He walks towards us with his well-structured narrative, full of pithy turns of phrase (of *Guernica* he says that Picasso had to "turn from icon-breaker to icon-maker"), disarming enthusiasm and even impersonations of the characters in his plot. He and the art are superbly filmed by a team of directors—Bernini's backlit marbles have never looked better. Schama is swathed in an endless variety of moody lighting in the Van Gogh film, which climaxes in a wonderfully Hollywood set of flash-frames representing the artist's breakdown.

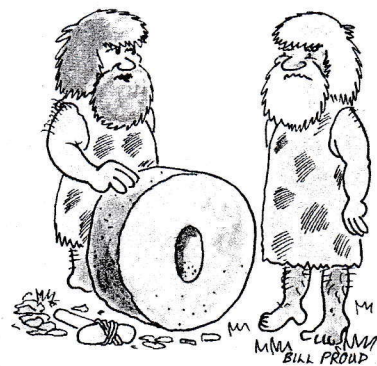
But visual and narrative polish are not the only virtues of this series. Typically for Schama, the populism goes hand in hand with contemporary scholarship. His sexy biographical history of art is just what art historians are returning to—as surely he knows. This comeback is the subject of a prophetic

Full of raunchy plots and stylish visuals, Simon Schama's new series, which tells the stories behind great art, puts most cultural programming to shame

BY BEN LEWIS

recent book, *Art as Existence*, by Gabriele Guercio. Since the end of the 19th century, Guercio argues, art history has been dominated by two master narratives. The first is the idea of the history of art as a sequence of big cultural movements—the Renaissance, mannerism, baroque, rococo—in which individual artists were subsumed. The second is the Marxist idea that art is the product of its social context—hence Roland Barthes's "death of the author." The new art history places the artist back at the centre, interacting with his friends, engaged with his own personal dilemmas, sometimes absorbing and sometimes resisting the ideas and events of the day.

But Schama's contemporaneity should not be exaggerated. His series is diminished by the lack of a female artist—though you could say that's the fault of centuries of patriarchy, not the presenter. There's also something wearing about the uniform subtext behind the narratives. Schama never gives us any sense of the limitations that were once imposed on European artists, who until some 150 years ago were compelled to paint scenes from the Bible, portraits, the odd Greek myth and Arcadian landscape, and not much else. As with most arts television, the message is a bit chocolatey. But at least Schama is serving us something fresh, delicious and surprising. That alone makes *Power of Art* a lot better than most cultural programming today. ■



"It's art. It doesn't need to be useful"