

## Book Review

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Carruthers, J. & Arnold, M. 1995. *The life and work of Thomas Baines*. Vlaeberg: Fernwood Press.

18 Many books on South African art that have been published in the past have become nice coffee table books, with excellent colour reproductions of the works of art accompanied by a mediocre text which provides rather generalized and superficial explanations of the printed works of art. The recent book by Carruthers & Arnold (1995) unfortunately follows the above pattern. Fernwood Press have done an excellent job at reproducing Baines's art on expensive paper. However, the same cannot be said of the layout of the illustrations – each chapter begins with a "figure 1", which makes referencing rather silly in other chapters, where the authors are compelled to say, for example, "(Chapter 9, fig. 11)" (p. 155) the whole time – or of the value of the interpretations of the works of art.

Despite Carruthers's adequate account of Thomas Baines's biographical details in the first seven chapters of the book – a fact that is not surprising, seeing she published a book on the artist in 1990 already – it is Arnold's interpretation of the artist's works that are the most disappointing. Consider, for example, the text under Baines's *Gold and ivory elephants* [sic] *charging over quartose country* (1874), which reads:

... the meaning is revealed by Baines's title. The elephant's ivory tusks signify wealth and they are charging over gold-bearing rocks. The artist... implies that Africa is a land of opportunity awaiting British enterprise (p. 15).

It is astounding what Arnold infers or "reads into" a scene of a charging gold and ivory elephant! There is no foundation for saying that tusks "signify wealth." Baines was not, as far as I know, an emblematic artist; nor did he have knowledge of semiotics. One cannot therefore imply that his images "signify" anything, beyond the representational, without solid evidence to support such a claim. Yet what else can one say about a charging elephant (which is neither gold nor ivory)? How can one spice up an illustrative painting with a more loftier meaning?

The above example is merely a prelude to Arnold's "art interpretations" from page 76 onwards until page 163 (at least half of which is filled up with full page reproductions – which shows that she actually has very little to say). On page 83, for example, the reader discovers that Baines's "tonal marks ... signify the enduring structures or rhythmic ephemerality of nature" – a most unenlightening observation, since it could apply equally to Turner or Cézanne, or any other artist for that matter. Further down the same page is the sentence: "Baines also used watercolour in detailed studies of objects ... to record colour and tone." This practice is hardly unique to Baines; once again, it does not shed any light on Baines, beyond the obvious.

Quotes like these examples crop up all over the book, but remain uninformative prose to the

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reader who expects more for their time (and money). What are the merits of publishing such a book in the first place? By the time the reader has read through to the last page (assuming they have the patience), the reader is none the wiser about Thomas Baines, beyond an account of his life and a superficial interpretation of his works in dead-pan prose.

Was the book worthy of a Sponsor's, Collector's and Standard Edition then? In terms of the limited numbers, perhaps it has an "investment" potential in the future. In terms of making money, it has no doubt paid for itself. In terms of the reproductions, perhaps the answer would be "yes"; seeing they are brought together and can reach a wider audience. In terms of the value of art historical scholarship and academic excellence, the answer would have to be "no". As a thesis, both in terms of layout, empirical data, and content (beyond the biographical), I doubt whether this book would stand up to an external examiner. It is possible, though, that the public at large will accept what they read as "the truth" without question; but I doubt that the art historical community in South Africa will be that gullible.

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