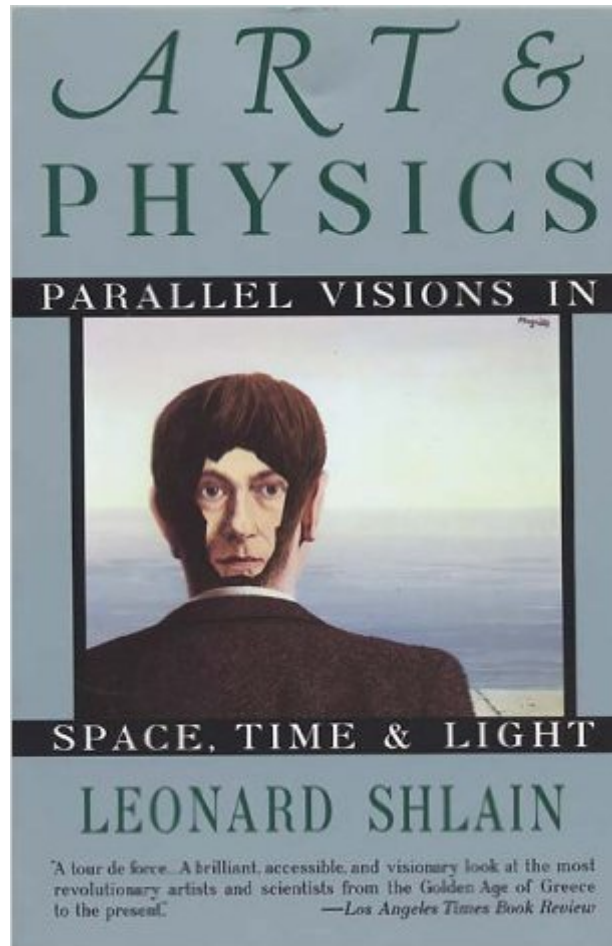


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Art And Physics: Parallel Visions In Space, Time, And Light



Synopsis

Art interprets the visible world, physics charts its unseen workings--making the two realms seem completely opposed. But in *Art & Physics*, Leonard Shlain tracks their breakthroughs side by side throughout history to reveal an astonishing correlation of visions. From the classical Greek sculptors to Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns, and from Aristotle to Einstein, artists have foreshadowed the discoveries of scientists, such as when Michelangelo and Cezanne intuited the coming upheaval in physics that Einstein would initiate. In this lively and colorful narrative, Leonard Shlain explores how artistic breakthroughs could have prefigured the visionary insights of physicists on so many occasions throughout history. Provocative and original, *Art & Physics* is a seamless integration of the romance of art and the drama of science...and exhilarating history of ideas.

Book Information

Paperback: 480 pages

Publisher: William Morrow; Reprint edition (January 28, 1993)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0688123058

ISBN-13: 978-0688123055

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1.2 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.7 pounds

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (58 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #191,100 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #33 in [Books > Science & Math > Physics > Applied](#) #276 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Art History](#) #568 in [Books > Textbooks > Science & Mathematics > Physics](#)

Customer Reviews

Being that my day to day occupation involves no thinking about physics in any complex way, or composition of music, literature, sculpting or painting, I feel in some ways disqualified from making certain kinds of assessments about Shlain's book. I cannot find fault with his understanding of the Theory of Relativity because, quite frankly, I am a physics neophyte. Similarly, I cannot fault his understanding of certain works of art or periods in art history because I am not a specialist in that field either. Some discontents will point out that this makes it possible for me to be hoodwinked into believing something because of my lack of expertise and, more importantly, given that Shlain is also a novice in either field, should automatically disqualify him from talking about something he knows very little about. If that was all there was to the story, I would agree and I would lambast the book,

but this is not the only thing that is at play here. Many people take umbrage with Shlain for trying to make connections where they seemingly don't exist. Why should anyone believe that H.G. Wells stumbled upon the theory of relativity before Einstein? Why should anyone concede that the rediscovery of perspective in art would bring about revolutionary scientific and social movements? Why on earth should we buy into the idea that Duchamp's famous "Nude Descending Down a Staircase" presaged the advancements made by Feynman? Making connections of this sort is unconscionable, cries the critic, but is it really? The book is a work of fancy and curiosity. Right off the bat Shlain professes his lack of expertise. You know you're dealing with one man's inquiry into what interests him. Simply put, Shlain is open to wonder. "Is there a connection?" he asks and then he goes on to try to find one. Instead of complaining about him playing a questionable game of connect the dots, why not stop and consider what he is asking instead of what he knows? Is it not possible at all that the curious and gifted human artist wonders about the things that surround him in the world? Does the curious and gifted artist not question his own place in the universe? And what makes the universe work as it does? Is it really that hard to believe that the rediscovery of perspective (if not brought about) at least presaged the coming of the renaissance? Can we find no proof at all in the world that the rediscovery of perspective in Europe influenced and changed the makeup of the continent? When Shakespeare wonders about the "orbs from whom we are and cease to be" he is not giving a kind of consideration that will also interest other philosophers, scientists and artists? Is it not at all possible that the discovery of the number 0 came directly as a result of a need to represent nothingness or void by writers and artists? It is said that the great books of mankind often talk to one another. This is very true. Every important book talks to Plato's books. All of Shakespeare's works talk to Dostoyevsky's. And every person who's ever wondered about anything at all will find their way into the conversation and discover this vast river of knowledge. Are we so proud as to say that man is nothing but an island? Is one field of inquiry so abstract and one so precise that they are mutually exclusive and therefore one could not have influenced the other? I find that very hard to believe. And even if Shlain is wrong to conclude that developments in art presaged those in science what he has done here is important for a number of reasons. For one, Shlain makes his arguments gently and the reader is never bullied into believing something he does not want to believe. Secondly, he has written a book for the masses and in this day and age, when most intellectuals write books for each other, that is an important achievement. And lastly, it is a book that raises questions every person should give consideration to. I, for one, enjoyed the book tremendously and have used it as a springboard or a torch light that is leading me to other artists, scientists and ideas. I hope that you give it a chance and should you find yourself in disagreement

with it, be thankful that it at least dares to wonder and challenge.

I've read a lot of books in my life. This is probably the best. The juxtaposition of generally exclusive topics - physics and art - is enough to put this work near the top on anyone's list. That it does it so well, and so meticulously, sends it to the head of the list. Schlain's exploration of the parallels between mankind's expanding understanding of the physical world and the concurrent changes in styles of physical art is gripping. I'm sure there are some flaws in his facts, but these pale in comparison to his monumental achievement in this work. I had a fair understanding of physics before starting the book and finished it better informed. At the same time, my admittedly weak knowledge of art history was more than supplemented. His explanation for the congruence he recounts is compelling, but he doesn't force it down the reader's throat. Rather, in a manner that is all too rare these days, Schlain presents the evidence, draws his conclusions and modestly leaves the reader to decide if the two match up. That I already subscribed to the explanation before I read the book may bias my opinion somewhat, but I must say that the conclusion is not the book's justification. Too many books are the opposite: They depend completely on the validity of thin insights and, so, end up padded with reams of extra pages drawing spurious connections to weak facts (apparently in the mistaken belief that repetition will bolster weak associations). By contrast, Schlain's conclusion appears as more of an afterthought. Here, the central insight is in the parallels recounted, not the conclusions to be drawn therefrom. And the book makes a solid case for the existence of these parallels, notwithstanding the odd factual error. Read this book. You'll learn a lot, even if you're already familiar with one subject or the other, and your thinking about the world will be shaken up a bit.

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