

# The *Grove Dictionary of Art*

by Joan Altabe



The watchtowers of art history must let their heads drop against the steering wheel sometimes. How else to explain the factual errors in the 34-volume *Grove Dictionary of Art* – the touted compendium of art and architecture facts from the Stone Age to the computer age – published by Grove Press, a division of Macmillan.

Some 7,000 scholars from 120 countries supplied the facts. Fifteen years in the making, the dictionary took as long to complete as it

pages long, is on a par with stand-alone books for sheer magnitude. The set measures close to six feet long. The index (670,000 entries) alone, runs 1,081 pages. Retailing at \$8,800 on publication 11 years ago, the dictionary, said to be the most comprehensive historical reference ever put out on art and architecture, is supposed to spoil you for all other art references. New York’s venerable Metropolitan Museum of Art even celebrated the arrival of these tomes with cocktails and congratulatory speeches. Publisher Ian Jacobs, who invested \$50 million in the project, recounted how he was warned against it. “Too damn big...too damn difficult,” he said.

(I’ll get to some of the errors in a moment).

The last definitive art history – a 17-volume set from McGraw-Hill – was published in 1968. Grove Press made a point about being up-to-date. Anything written before 1994 was returned to the authors for updating. Those who contributed to the 45,000 articles in the set – selected for their expertise – are from so many distant lands that 40 percent of the writing required translation into English.

Yet, some of the material was not updated. For example, there was no entry for *View of the St. Lawrence Church in Alkmaar, 1661* by Pieter Saenredam, even though latter-day scientific studies attribute this important painting to him.



took the ancient Greeks to build the Parthenon. Michelangelo could have painted two Sistine Chapel ceilings lying on his back and using only one hand in that time.

Granted, each volume, at nearly a thousand

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Not that the research in the dictionary isn't exhaustive. You get obscure information, like the factoid that Michelangelo suffered pain for many years on urinating, due to a long-standing kidney stone. Yet, the article on the Prairie School, an architecture style that Frank Lloyd Wright favored, is paltry – less than half a page.

Schools and libraries gobbled up the books. Half of the first run of 6,000 copies were sold – 60 sets to libraries in Florida, including several libraries in Sarasota where I live and work – New College, Ringling College of Art and Design, Florida's state museum, the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art and the city's main branch, the Selby Library.

Focusing on scholarship for these institutions, I spotted a mistake that even a local elementary school kid wouldn't make. The dictionary confuses the Ringling mansion (Ca' D'Zan or House of John) with the museum he founded. Such a goof can have you wondering how many other grade school mistakes there are, particularly since the source for the Ringling entry is questionable: A.F. Janson's *Great Paintings from the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art*, published in 1986, when Janson was the museum's chief curator. To hear a museum official who succeeded Janson tell it, the scholarship in his book is faulty. Aaron De Groft has said that Janson was wrong when he wrote that the tapestries –

the ones on which the Ringling Museum's prized Rubens are based – hung in a Carmelite convent in Madrid for three centuries. They hung in a Franciscan convent.

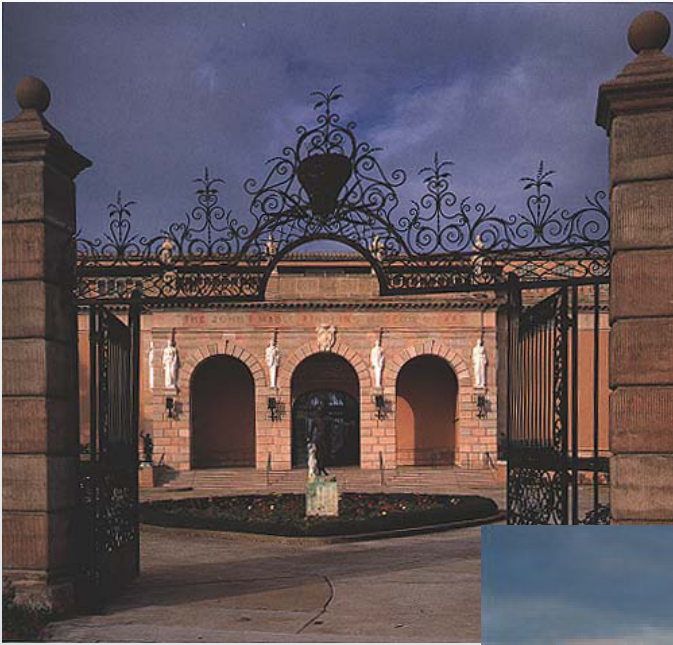
That Janson was wrong about the Rubens work shouldn't surprise anyone given his area of expertise – the 19th century landscape movement known as the Hudson River school. Janson wrote his graduate dissertation on the painter Thomas Worthington Whittredge, who was a Hudson River school artist. (De Groft's area of expertise is also the 19th century, but in relation to 17th century Dutch and Flemish painting).

Even in his writing on Whittredge, Janson's scholarship was careless. For example, he faulted the painter for not giving proper credit to artists from whom he borrowed, saying that the artist "avoids any reference that might suggest a debt to other artists."

But Whittredge's autobiographical writings say otherwise: "When I looked at (Asher B.) Durand's truly American landscape, so delicate and refined, I confess that tears came to my eyes. I viewed with no less interest the more masterful work of (Thomas) Cole.... "

So much for dictionary contributors picked on the basis of their expertise.

When informed that the dictionary mistook Ringling's mansion for his museum, Karen Augusta, director of marketing for the reference in North America, said she was not surprised. "I'm sure



*The Ringling Museum (above) and Mansion (right).*

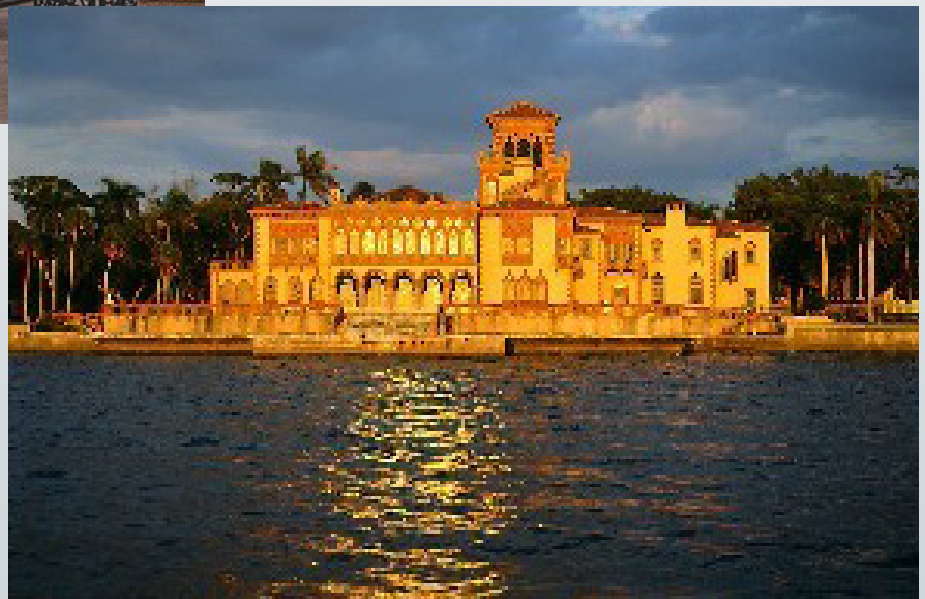
over the next year, as people begin to use the dictionary, they will discover errors. In a work of this size, it's bound to happen." In anticipation of this, a record of the errors is kept so that they can be corrected in future editions, she said.

Are you getting this? Despite the near \$9,000 price tag and despite being crafted to endure time (your hands want to stroke the luxuriant emerald-green cloth that binds it), this epic doesn't transcend time at all. You're expected to wait for the next time around for the real deal.

Perhaps if the dictionary staff spent less time on trivia, as in, "Did you know that Picasso saved his nail clippings and locks of hair?" and more time on accurate reporting, errors wouldn't have occurred. This goes for the color reproductions, too. They are not faithful to

the original art owing to their source – stock art rather than museums' own. For the price of the book and the time it took to produce it, shouldn't the high quality of museums' own reproductions have been sought?

Hype for the dictionary, like, "the highest intellectual standards of scholarship," is tantamount to false advertising. Maybe if it weren't ballyhooed for being a 26.3



million-word "monument to art-historical scholarship," maybe if it hadn't used a 19th century art expert for a collection of 17th century art, maybe if the reference staff had spent less time counting the number of words and the rate of proofing them – 1,000 a day – maybe then the dictionary would have been more reliable.

And since it took 15 years to gather information for the dictionary, why the rush to edit it? 📧