
Donald Friedman, *The Writer's Brush*

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**DONALD FRIEDMAN, *THE WRITER'S BRUSH*.
MINNEAPOLIS, 2007, 457 p.**

Marie-Odile Bernez

This is a review of Donald Friedman's *The Writer's Brush: Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture by Writers, with Essays by William H. Gass and John Updike* (Mid-List Press, Minneapolis, 2007) 457 p. ISBN : 978-0-922811-76-2, and of its French adaptation and translation by Christian-Martin Diebold, Lucie Taffin and Fenn Troller, *Peintures et dessins d'écrivains, De Victor Hugo à Boris Vian* (Beaux-Arts éditions, 2013), 230p. ISBN: 978 -2-84278-995-4.

There are few academic studies on the subject of writers as visual artists. Some publications simply reproduce writers' art works. This is the case for instance of *Dessins d'écrivains*, by Pierre Belfond (éditions du Chêne, 2003, 176 p. ISBN : 2842774892), which is based on the author's collection of writers' drawings. Pierre Belfond opted for a chronological approach and his short book presents writers' drawings/arts works alongside selected extracts from their writings. Among the scholarly essays available, *Interfaces 29*, "Artists' Words and Writers' Images", published in 2009-2010, has a handsome collection of essays on the subject. We have to mention as well *More than Words: Illustrated Letters from the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art*, by Lisa Kirwin, curator at the Smithsonian, a collection of letters by artists which includes both texts and images (Princeton Architectural Press, Hardcover edition, 2005; Paperback edition, 2025, ISBN : 978-1616893668). Some exhibition catalogues are also still available, such as *L'écrit; le signe. Autour de quelques dessins d'écrivains*, by Annick Cohen, Michel Melot and Bernard Noël (Bibliothèque Publique d'Information, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1991, 96 p., ISBN-13: 978-2902706495), written for an exhibition held at the Pompidou Centre at the time. In 2008, another exhibition of writers' art works was held in Normandy, instigated by IMEC (Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine) with a conference on the same subject. The collected essays are available in *Dessins d'écrivains*, by Claire Bustarret, Yves Chèvrefils Desbiolles and Claire Paulhan (Le Manuscrit, 2011, 274 p. ISBN 978-2-304-03600-8). Donald Friedman's work was also partly inspired by an exhibition of writers' works held in the Chicago Arts Club, whose catalogue *A Second Talent: An Exhibition of Drawings and Paintings by Writers*, by Rue Winterbotham Shaw

(Chicago, 1971, no longer available) fueled his early interest for writers' art. Friedman himself, along with John Wronosky, organized an exhibition of writers' artworks which gathered 264 pieces of art by 139 world-class poets and writers, including several Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize laureates. The exhibition was held in 2007 at Shapolsky Gallery, NY, and 2008 at Pierre Menard Gallery, Cambridge, Mass. The catalogue produced at the time was not sold to the public but is available in US university libraries and museums (*The Writer's Brush: An Exhibition of Artwork by Writers*, by Donald Friedman and John Wronosky, with an introduction by Joseph McElroy, Anita Shapolsky Arts Foundation, 2014, ISBN 978-1-4675-7558-4).

The Writer's Brush published in 2007 offers the reader an original approach because its author has interviewed writers on the subject of their art works, and so has compiled a long series of intimate views into their creative process. His huge volume is mostly designed to focus the readers' interest on the art works themselves. Author Donald Friedman¹ has spent years collecting information, interviewing writers, haunting libraries, archives and art galleries, and he has compiled more than 200 writers who tried their hand at the visual arts, from the eighteenth century (Goethe, Blake) to the present day (the youngest, Jonathan Lethem, being born in 1964). All of them wrote, but also drew, painted, or sculpted, in very different ways. As Friedman recalls in his introduction, organizing his material was somewhat daunting and so he settled on presenting it in alphabetical order. The volume's dictionary-like arrangement places side-by-side hugely different personalities, and relieved him of the trouble of categorizing and labelling, a formidable if not impossible task. It also provides opportunities for making connections one might not otherwise consider. Friedman has thoughtfully provided a chronological list as an annex, which may be more satisfying for some readers. It certainly affords food for thought about the influence of artistic trends on writers as time passes.

The layout of the volume goes beyond the scope of a dictionary however, since the artistic productions and life stories of the authors are presented side by side on a double page. On the left, the text presents the author's life and books, and on the right, two or three images typical of her/his artistic creation are carefully reproduced. The readers find something of what they expect from a dictionary in the entries since Friedman always gives us a biographical note about the selected authors, even the most famous, and never omits the titles, awards or university degrees they gained. But this is done as a kind of conclusion, footnote or afterthought. The extensive entries always start with the relations of the writer to their practice as visual artists, whether through their letters or interviews, or through other people's testimonies. Friedman has found enlightening anecdotes, revealing quotes, and arresting

¹ Donald Friedman is by profession a trial attorney and by vocation a novelist, the author of short stories, essays, and the variously translated *The Writer's Brush: Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture by Writers*.

episodes about all of them. It shows how much research and warmth went into his work and his attitude to his subjects – who are, indeed, subjects, and not simply objects of his study.

The carefully chosen format—the double-page with biographical elements and art works—showcases the diversity of the authors' life-stories and the complex reasons and motives behind their engagement with the visual arts. In his substantial introduction, Friedman stresses the maladjustment of many, if not most, of the artists : whether poets, novelists, cartoonists, they were often caught up in wars or conflicts, traumatized by childhood powerlessness, abandoned or pressurized by parents, educators and authorities. Many turned to drugs or alcoholism, and sought relief in their art or their writing. Even if they were socially successful, the need to express their views as individual personalities, or their revulsion at the absurdity of social constructs or simply life, is very much highlighted. The tragic fate that many of them met, the number of suicides or early deaths strike the reader. Yet the idea that art results from suffering or hyper sensitiveness, if it explains the fundamental urge for writing or drawing, does not account for the incredible diversity of their productions, which is what the book delights in.

From the doodles in the margins of manuscripts (Dostoevsky, Pushkin) to the accomplished oil portraits (Huxley, Wyndham Lewis, William Dunlap); from the satirical cartoons (Jules Feiffer, Charles Johnson, Sean O'Casey, Tom Wolfe) to the serene landscapes (George Sand, Derek Walcott, Marianne Moore, Yeats); from the painstaking attempts at realism (Gautier, Hardy, Poe) to the most incredible flights of fancy (Henry Darger) or drug-induced fantastic images (Michaux, Witkacy), the pages open each time to a new world, that of the individual artist. The readers are first tempted to go to the more famous names to discover another aspect of their personality; but then they are caught up by the images produced by the less well known, and turn from their art works to their life stories and the discussion of their writings.

Donald Friedman's book is striking because it is inclusive of all artists and materials: collages by Breton, Prévert, Andersen and Deborah Greger; illustrations from children's books' writers, like Kate Greenaway and Beatrix Potter; sculptures by Wiliam Trevor, Ernst Barlach and Pearl Buck; watercolours, ink and pencil drawings; caricatures and abstract art; Churchill's paintings as well as Vandewetering's installations; the arresting drawings made by Mervyn Peake at Belsen as well as jokey cartoons by Perelman or Mayakovsky's Bolshevik propaganda.

All the writers examined had very diverse connections with art and the art world. Some painted in childhood and stopped when success came with their first books. Some started drawing late in life, long after publishing their last written works. Some were trained artists that turned to writing. Some were artists first and foremost, like Kokoschka. Some were failed artists who eventually gave

up, whereas others had their works exhibited. Some valued their art; some hardly said a word about it. Some illustrated their own books. Some wrote and painted with the same gusto. Able to balance their creativity equally between writing and drawing, they achieved fame in both mediums. Of course, Jean Cocteau and William Morris spring to mind here. The lesson from the book, however, is that categories and labels would be not only useless, but counter-productive, since what is at the heart of this volume is the mystery of the creative process as it is accomplished by every individual. Visual art contributed sometimes to the writing process, by allowing the authors to visualize their characters but it was sometimes, on the contrary, something that took them away from the writing desk, their *violon d'Ingres*. The book samples all the shades between these two extremes.

The sheer number of writers/artists presented questions the connection between writing and drawing. The two mediums seem intimately connected, to an extent that is not true for other forms of art. That is what we are reminded of by the thought-provoking and scholarly essay by William H. Gass included in this volume, entitled “La Maison d’En Face, or that other art”. The alphabet is primarily a series of graphic lines, and lines make up writing and drawing – but the visual arts also comprise sculpting, and painting, which have to do with filled-in shapes and spots of colours. Gass points out that writing implies a content that can be reproduced in the form of a book, whereas the visual artist seems more likely to produce a single piece of work, though modern techniques have blurred this distinction. As keyboards have now replaced handwriting, and cameras have freed the need to have any drawing skill, we might think the connection between the two mediums has weakened. And yet it persists because the relationship is both cognitive and aesthetic. Cognitive, because the hand movement is an accompaniment to the way our brain functions, aesthetic because the art works, accompanied or not by writing, seem to fulfill a need for beauty, truth or self-expression. This overlap of the arts provides something we might call a reaching out from the inner self to the outside world.

This is what is clearly explained by another giant of literature, John Updike, who also contributed an essay to Friedman’s volume. In this essay entitled “Writers and artists”, Updike gives us an intimate view of the process by which writing and drawing are intertwined. For Updike, there is more than a dual muse guiding the writers/artists: it is one art that is at stake, since writers strive to make you see, and since both writing and drawing consist in making “dark marks on white paper”. This takes us to Apollinaire’s calligrammes, or the rise of graphic novels today that connect these two facets of creation, by closely associating texts and images.

The French adaptation is narrower in scope and centered on French artists and famous writers in the classical literary canon, as suggested by the French subtitle (“From Victor Hugo to Boris Vian”). It adds six French writers to Donald Friedman’s selection (Desnos, Eluard, Maupassant, Queneau, Claude Simon and Boris Vian), but removes 93 writers/artists, generally less well-known in France,

or considered less canonical. The French edition has managed to keep the general tone of the original edition. The errors in translation are certainly not apparent to the French reader, but are a pity when compared to the original text. There are also fewer illustrations. The French publishers have added subtitles to each entry, the dates of birth and death of the writer discussed, but they have left aside the annexes: the chronological list, the catalogue of other writers/artists that were not included, entitled "Among the missing", and the essays by Gass and Updike, though Gass's essay draws on an impressive number of French writers/artists to make his point (Leiris, George Sand, Jules de Goncourt, Queneau and Cocteau among others).

Friedman continues to provide the public with works by writers/artists via the Internet. He has set up an on-line gallery of images by subsequently unearthed writers/artists. It includes art by Jorge Luis Borges, Ken Kesey, Joseph Brodsky, and Bob Dylan as well as lesser-knowns. Additions are made weekly and excerpts of on-camera interviews done with noted writer-artists are also available.

<https://donaldfriedman.com/>