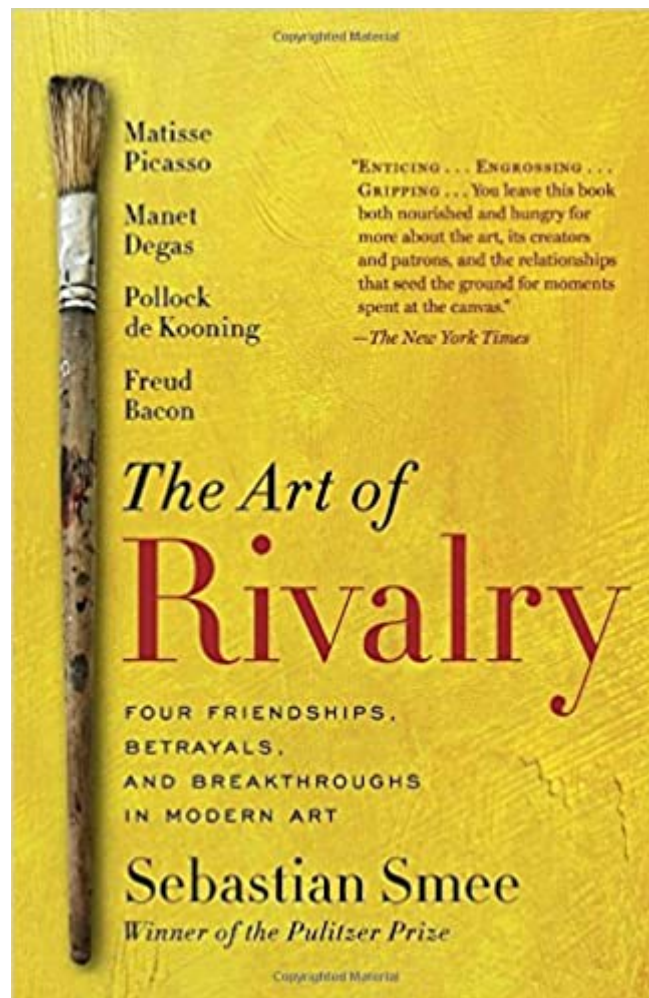




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# The Art Of Rivalry: Four Friendships, Betrayals, And Breakthroughs In Modern Art



## Synopsis

Pulitzer Prize-winning art critic Sebastian Smee tells the fascinating story of four pairs of artists—Manet and Degas, Picasso and Matisse, Pollock and de Kooning, Freud and Bacon—whose fraught, competitive friendships spurred them to new creative heights. Rivalry is at the heart of some of the most famous and fruitful relationships in history. The *Art of Rivalry* follows eight celebrated artists, each linked to a counterpart by friendship, admiration, envy, and ambition. All eight are household names today. But to achieve what they did, each needed the influence of a contemporary—one who was equally ambitious but possessed sharply contrasting strengths and weaknesses. Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas were close associates whose personal bond frayed after Degas painted a portrait of Manet and his wife. Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso swapped paintings, ideas, and influences as they jostled for the support of collectors like Leo and Gertrude Stein and vied for the leadership of a new avant-garde. Jackson Pollock's uninhibited style of "action painting" triggered a breakthrough in the work of his older rival, Willem de Kooning. After Pollock's sudden death in a car crash, de Kooning assumed Pollock's mantle and became romantically involved with his late friend's mistress. Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon met in the early 1950s, when Bacon was being hailed as Britain's most exciting new painter and Freud was working in relative obscurity. Their intense but asymmetrical friendship came to a head when Freud painted a portrait of Bacon, which was later stolen. Each of these relationships culminated in an early flashpoint, a rupture in a budding intimacy that was both a betrayal and a trigger for great innovation. Writing with the same exuberant wit and psychological insight that earned him a Pulitzer Prize for art criticism, Sebastian Smee explores here the way that coming into one's own as an artist—finding one's voice—almost always involves willfully breaking away from some intimate expectations of who you are or ought to be. Praise for *The Art of Rivalry* "Gripping . . . Mr. Smee's skills as a critic are evident throughout. He is persuasive and vivid. . . . You leave this book both nourished and hungry for more about the art, its creators and patrons, and the relationships that seed the ground for moments spent at the canvas." —The New York Times "With novella-like detail and incisiveness [Sebastian Smee] opens up the worlds of four pairs of renowned artists. . . . Each of his portraits is a biographical gem. . . . The *Art of Rivalry* is a pure, informative delight, written with canny authority." —The Boston Globe "Bacon liked to say his portraiture aimed to capture 'the pulsations of a person.' Revealing these rare creators as the invaluable catalysts they also were, Smee conveys exactly that on page after page. . . . His brilliant

group biography is one of a kind. *“Perceptive . . . Smee is onto something important. His book may bring us as close as we’ll ever get to understanding the connections between these bristly bonds and brilliance.”* *The Christian Science Monitor* *“In this intriguing work of art history and psychology, The Boston Globe’s art critic looks at the competitive friendships of Matisse and Picasso, Manet and Degas, Pollock and de Kooning, and Freud and Bacon. All four relationships illuminate the creative process both its imaginative breakthroughs and its frustrating blocks.”* *Newsday* From the Hardcover edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

*“Gripping . . . Mr. Smee’s skills as a critic are evident throughout. He is persuasive and vivid. . . . The Art of Rivalry is rooted in a closely observed theory, but it roams in a way geared to nonspecialist readers, part mini-biographies, part broader art history. . . . You leave this book both nourished and hungry for more about the art, its creators and patrons, and the relationships that seed the ground for moments spent at the canvas.”* *The New York Times* *“With novella-like detail and incisiveness [Sebastian Smee] opens up the worlds of four pairs of renowned artists. . . . Each of his portraits is a biographical gem, deftly taking social milieus, family backgrounds, and the art controversies of the day into account. . . . Smee’s vivid, agile prose is especially good at evoking the temperaments of the personalities involved. . . . The Art of Rivalry is a pure, informative delight, written with canny authority.”* *The Boston*

Globe” “Bacon liked to say his portraiture aimed to capture “the pulsations of a person.” Revealing these rare creators as the invaluable catalysts they also were, Smee conveys exactly that on page after page. . . . His brilliant group biography is one of a kind.” “The Atlantic” “Perceptive . . . [Sebastian Smee showcases] the crucial painter-vs.-painter passions that spurred eight brilliant modern artists toward their greatest work. . . . Smee is onto something important. His book may bring us as close as we’ll ever get to understanding the connections between these bristly bonds and brilliance.” “The Christian Science Monitor” “In this intriguing work of art history and psychology, The Boston Globe’s art critic looks at the competitive friendships of Matisse and Picasso, Manet and Degas, Pollock and de Kooning, and Freud and Bacon. All four relationships illuminate the creative process both its imaginative breakthroughs and its frustrating blocks.” “Newsday” “A fresh and fruitful approach to art history . . . [Sebastian Smee’s] double portraits are deeply moving, even haunting in their investigations of artistic and emotional symbioses of incalculable intricacy and consequence.” “Booklist” (starred review) “Beautifully written . . . This ambitious and impressive work is an utterly absorbing read about four important relationships in modern art.” “Publishers Weekly” (starred review) “The keynotes of Sebastian Smee’s criticism have always included a fine feeling for the what of art he knows how to evoke the way pictures really strike the eye and an equal sense of the how of art: how art emerges from the background of social history. To these he now adds a remarkable capacity for getting down the who of art the enigma of artists’ personalities, and the way that, two at a time, they can often intersect to reshape each in the other’s image. With these gifts all on the page together, The Art of Rivalry gives us a remarkable and engrossing book on pretty much the whole of art.” “Adam Gopnik, author of Paris to the Moon and The Table Comes First” “Modern art’s major pairs of frenemies are a subject so fascinating, it’s strange to have a book on it only now and a stroke of luck, for us, that the author is Sebastian Smee. He brings the perfect combination of artistic taste and human understanding, and a prose style as clear as spring water, to the drama and occasional comedy of men who inspired and annoyed one another to otherwise inexplicable heights of greatness.” “Peter Schjeldahl, art critic for The New Yorker” “This is a magnificent book on the relationships at the roots of artistic genius. Smee offers a gripping tale of the fine line between friendship and competition, tracing how the ties that torment us most are often the ones that inspire us most.” “Adam Grant, Wharton professor and

New York Times bestselling author of *Originals* and *Give and Take* From the Hardcover edition.

Sebastian Smee has been *The Boston Globe's* art critic since 2008. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 2011, having been a runner-up in 2008. He joined the *Globe's* staff from Sydney, where he had worked as national art critic for *The Australian*. Prior to that, he lived for four years in the U.K., where he wrote for *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Art Newspaper*, *The Independent*, *Prospect* magazine, and *The Spectator*. He has contributed to five books on Lucian Freud. He teaches nonfiction writing at Wellesley College. From the Hardcover edition.

At first I thought the conceit behind this book was pretty thin but on reading it is extremely well done and a must read for those seriously interested in ideas around art making. Smee is undoubtedly an excellent writer it was the concept that I thought was worrying. The book flows, is engaging and indeed in some sections a page turner, not something you might easily apply to a book of art history. Well done.

This book was written really well, and most interesting! Right out of the gate it grabbed me. I never knew there was a Degas that Manet messed up, and I felt like I was on the train privy to Sebastian Smee's thoughts about the expectation of seeing a work of art. I never knew much about Bacon and Freud. I think I enjoyed the De Kooning/Pollack portion the best. I found the whole thing very interesting though, the angst involved in trying to push the envelope, and the crushing criticism over the new. To me, you either like it or you don't. You can have a DeKooning that's a woman big and crazy, but then the colors might make you want to eat it, they are so sumptuous. Pollack more interests me from his bad boy brawler personality more than his drip paintings. I found it interesting to read about his family background. Picasso, there is much of his work that gets me. I never ever cared for *Les Femmes d'Alger*, but then when I stood in front of *Seated Bather* at MOMA it took my breath away. I LOVE Matisse's work. Degas isn't necessarily my thing, but you can't get away from how great he was. It was interesting his relationship with Manet since he seemed to have a large personality and Degas, he seemed like a real curmudgeon, a drag to be around almost. I thought the writing was fluid, and I enjoyed Smee's opinions, and his vocabulary. I have an extensive art book collection which I pore over from time to time, but with that, I still knew very little about the artists lives, and now, at least as far as these 8 artists go, I feel much better informed!

Art history--the paintings are put in the context of the life story, the rival's output, and the stage in career development. To me the most important learning was that these gifted artists struggled in life to find a style and/or technique to distinguish their own work and to break into the marketplace with collectors and galleries and the media. One of the best books I've read about artists and their creative development. Highly recommended.

A good read though there weren't enough examples of each artists work.

A little dense & "chatty."

Excellent writing. Nice 4 parts- each slightly different but still tied to the theme. He accomplishes his goal of analyzing rivalries in the art world. Wonder if it applies in other spheres of influence in society - writers, musicians, college professors, doctors, lawyers, politicians?Worth reading and the audible book is excellently narrated.

Sebastian Smee packs into the title of his book "The Art of Rivalry: Four Friendships, Betrayals, and Breakthroughs in Modern Art" the recurring themes of the relationships of the four artist pairs his book describes: Freud and Bacon; Manet and Degas; Matisse and Picasso; Pollock and de Kooning. The relationships began when a younger artist followed the older, being shaped by him and searching to do something different, something better, something, newer - everywhere, in art, in love, in commercial success. In the process both parties grew and both parties reacted - Smee deals with all the things that ultimately led to the artistic breakthrough. We learn about the rather unattractive sides of the artists and their art.

An excellent and entertaining factual read. Thought provoking and insightful. I really enjoyed the scope of it, the broad range of history and culture that is referenced here. Famous male artists whom anyone with an education in art history may know about but not from quite this angle.

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