Book Review

Donald J. La Rocca, *How to Read European Armor*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2017, 160pp, colour and black and white illustrations, £15 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-58839-629-7

At this point in his career Donald J. La Rocca has very little left to prove. Even the most casual of scholars with an interest in the history of arms and armour will no doubt be familiar with his name. By any estimation, he is a well-established and well respected authority in his field, having joined the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1988 and authoring over 35 publications on the subject. For anyone seeking an authoritative introduction to the world of European armour, La Rocca is an ideal guide.

*How to Read European Armour* is part of a much larger, ‘*How to Read,*’ series produced by the Metropolitan Museum of Arts, the intention being that each volume will, ‘*introduce the general reader to a group of related works from the Museum’s encyclopedic collection,*’ (p. 7). In this respect, La Rocca’s book is a resounding success.

The book is beautifully formatted with a clear, easy to absorb layout. It combines high quality photographs with contemporary historical images and modern diagrams, which complement each other to offer a relatively complete visual history of the development and evolution of European armour. The sheer quality and quantity of these images alone make this book an essential acquisition for anyone with any appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of armour.

This book is far more than a collection of pleasing images though. It offers a robust yet elegantly succinct summary of the development, evolution and subsequent decline of armour throughout Europe, stretching, albeit briefly, from the earliest bronze armours of the 5th century BC right up to the pinnacle of armour design in the late 16th century, and its eventual decline from the mid-17th century onwards. The real core of the book though, focusses upon plate armour of the 15th to the 17th centuries. It is also refreshing to see the author skilfully bridge the gap between then and now, alluding, albeit briefly, to the continuation of armour beyond the 17th century, with the advent of the firearm as the preeminent battlefield weapon, and how medieval equipment helped to inspire a new era of armour design in the 20th century, the British Brodie helmet being used as a superb example. All too often authors on the subject simply abandon the story of armour at the point when firearms start to dominate the battlefield.

Introductory guides often feel rushed, dumbed down or lacking in essential information, (despite the useful photography, Paul F Walker’s *The History of Armour 1100–1700* springs to mind) but here La Rocca offers perhaps one of the best introductory summaries of the subject. The content is well structured, well thought out and most importantly well written, with even the most technical terminology and aspects of armour presented in a way that is satisfying for the more seasoned academic and yet easily understood for the beginner.

To complement and illustrate his description of a ‘typical’ armour, La Rocca uses the Dos Aguas Garniture as his case study. This stunning example of a mid-16th century armour was a shrewd choice on the part of the author, allowing him to discuss armour in all its guises, from practical field armour and specialized tournament armour, to ceremonial parade armour all in one piece. It is here though, that a criticism must be raised.
By using the Dos Aguas armour as the main visual accompaniment for the description and breakdown of individual component pieces, we are offered a somewhat isolated and overly specific pictorial example, and with only a brief account of how and why the evolution of armour actually arrived at this point. Although there are scattered images of earlier and alternative styles of armour, there is very rarely any accompanying information provided beyond the basic name, date and brief provenance with which to fill in the gaps. A comparative breakdown of an 14th or 15th century armour, linked by a paragraph or two highlighting the key changes and continuations that occurred through the evolution of armour, would have told a much more rounded, complete story.

Likewise, although an entire chapter is dedicated to tournament armours, their evolution and development is only briefly alluded too, and with only a few brief sentences being offered to describe the equipment used prior to the emergence of specific tournament armours, ‘As early as the thirteenth century, there is evidence that reinforcing pieces were added to otherwise standard battle armor to give extra protection in tournaments’ (p. 85).’ The extra investment of a few more paragraphs, to offer some deeper contextual background, would have been a valuable addition.

While there are a couple photographs detailing the back of tassets and cuisses for example (p. 53 and 64) it is a shame that more technical images showing the reverse or inside of the armour were not included. This would have added valuable insight and a much more technical aspect to the book, which is largely preoccupied with the artistic and aesthetic values of the armour.

Ultimately though, How to Read European Armour is intended to be an introduction to the subject for the general reader, and not a definitive magnum opus on the subject. The gaps in this book are few and far between, and probably better suited to a weightier, more in-depth volume for the more advanced scholar. Furthermore, it is only natural that the Metropolitan Museum, as an art museum first and foremost, would lean primarily towards the aesthetic qualities of armour. Nonetheless, the balance between armour as art and armour as practical equipment is well maintained throughout.

It has to be said therefore, that La Rocca has ultimately been successful, having provided the reader with a comprehensive yet relatively compact, attractive and easy to digest volume on the subject, at a very reasonable price. The reader is left with a clear concept of the multifaceted nature of armour, existing as practical battlefield protection, highly specialized pieces of sports equipment, statements of social, cultural and political status, and as pieces of wearable sculpture, echoing the fashions, styles and artistic tastes of the time.

La Rocca has compiled an excellent volume, which will no doubt be the starting point for many a reader’s new found fascination with the field of European armour.

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