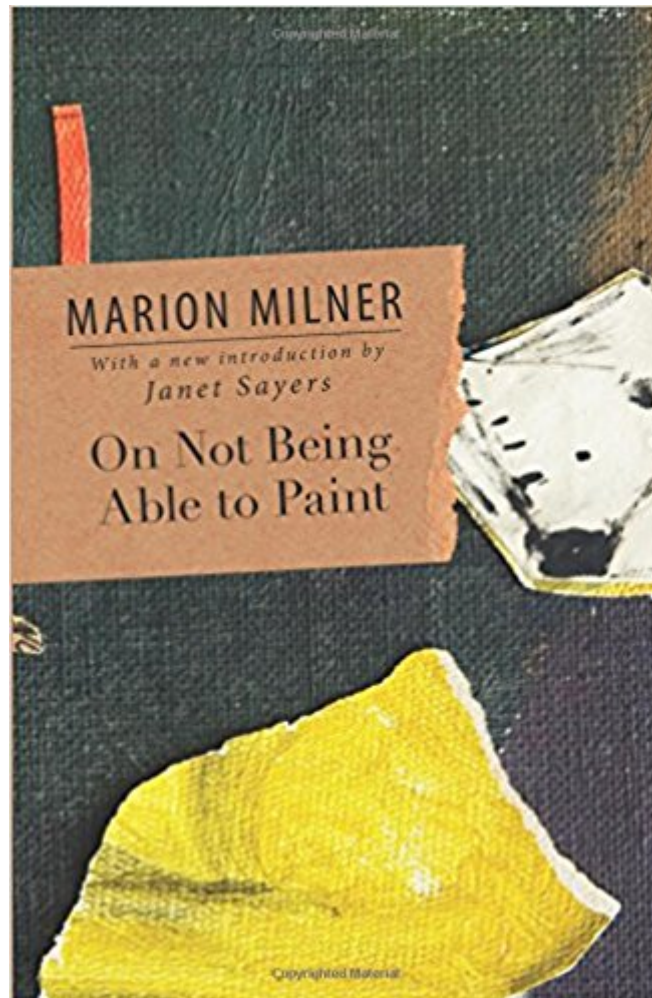




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On Not Being Able To Paint



Synopsis

Milner's great study, first published in 1950, discusses the nature of creativity and those forces which prevent its expression. In focusing on her own beginner's efforts to draw and paint, she analyses not the mysterious and elusive ability of the genius but as the title suggests the all too common and distressing situation of not being able to create. With a new introduction by Janet Sayers, this edition of *On Not Being Able to Paint* brings the text to the present generation of readers in the fields of psychoanalysis, education and all those, specialist and general audiences alike, with an interest or involvement in the creative process and those impulses impeding it in many fields.

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Customer Reviews

"[This is a book] that has done so much over the years to bring about awareness of the interplay of inner and outer reality in art and in everyday life." as Janet Sayers, from the Introduction.

"By engaging with the creative process through her book, [Milner] comes to appreciate the intrinsic value in the process of painting as a tool for greater self-awareness and engagement with life rather than something separate from living. And this frees her (and all of us who relate to her perspective) from the expectation that each work should be a masterpiece. ... *On Not Being Able to Paint* highlights the value of the creative process as a vehicle for achieving a transcendent state in which there is a complete loss of self-consciousness and a sense of oneness with the subject matter." - Josie Eastwood

Marion Milner (1900-1998) was a distinguished British psychoanalyst, educationalist, autobiographer and artist.

If you are a person who thinks "I can't draw" and you are led to conclude that this book will show you what that is about, you will be disappointed. This book is far deeper than any how-to book ever conceived. The author is in fact a sophisticated user of pencil and brush but she realizes that she does not have the gift of a master and is engaged in understanding the leap from competence to excellence by treating art-making as a branch of psychoanalysis. The reader without specialized background will need a glossary to clarify Milner's meanings, but her observations shoot directly to the heart of the issue, and she brings great intensity to the art experience. In a short discussion of composition, for example, she discusses the high-voltage produced by small movements of elements in a painting. Much of development is about seeing: I know that my first half-dozen or so art classes were about little else, perhaps because of my own shortcomings; Milner does not overlook "seeing" as an issue in the juxtaposition of conscious and subconscious processes, but I am still processing what she had to say in this area. She would have understood perfectly what Cage is quoted as saying, "When you start working, everybody is in your studio- the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas- all are there. But as you continue painting, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you're lucky, even you leave." I recommend the book for its insights, but it is not a shortcut to anywhere.

Reading this book was like talking to a psychiatrist. At first what she wrote and looking at her drawings was not really mixing harmoniously in my head so after couple chapters I decided to start from the beginning. I grasped her ideas on my second try. I felt like watching myself in a magnifying mirror. I was amazed not only on her slow paced writing style but also on her calm and orderly way of approaching her long dreamt hobby. She is not in rush, she doesn't push herself. She had a quality that I did not have. Whenever I started a new hobby I pushed myself too hard that I quickly ended myself burnt out and slowly moved away my attention as soon as I reached my goal. I understood why I did not have a hobby that lasted more than couple of years. FYI, I wasn't aiming to learn how to paint so I am not sure if people buying this book to learn how to paint will appreciate or not.

An excellent book by a woman trained in psychoanalysis who reflects on the reasons why she is

unable to paint to the standard she requires of herself.

Marion Milner's book deserves to be read by students of Object Relations theory and art therapists as well.

On Not Being Able To Paint would perhaps be better title, Why One Should Paint. Trained as Freudian psychologist, Joanna Field all too painstakingly analyzes her rudimentary drawing and painting efforts in an attempt uncover what ultimately transpires in the process. An ancient quest for sure but depending upon one's knowledge in either the art, education or psychological fields, the road thus traveled is relatively interesting. As a professional artist, I found her all too subjective diatribes tiring, boring, even stretching the limits of believability in the sense that she was able to draw such cataclysmic conclusions from the bad visuals she produced. Her analytical training was obviously taking the upper hand as she "read" so much into own work. However, at the end of each segment, she manages to pull her rantings together for some thoughtful and genuine insights as to what took place throughout her process. Midway through, she departs from her dependence upon the sketches, begins to analyze in a broader, more universal context and salvages the book. She then rather clearly and poetically takes us through dreams, visions, both disillusion and illusion, realizing that, "the inner subjective and outer objective aspects of reality are in a continual state of change and development" and feels that a painter beautifully solves the problem of navigating these (constructed) worlds by inventing a "half-way house between the dream receiver and the external one". She then offers rather keen insight as to how the artist has to "pay" in communicability for this navigational privilege for with others able to share his/her dream, s/he is more "absolved from the guilt or defiance of common sense reality". Of course then, there is the psycho-analytic relation of visual symbols to our sexual development but here her training shines and I found myself thinking of parts of my visual practice in a new light. A colleague, well versed in the history of psychoanalytic development made the astute comment that considering the limited scope of the practice at the time, (she comments on just finishing a drawing at the precipice of WWI), the relationships she manifests are insightful and progressive. Her final strength is her exploration of how this new found knowledge should be boldly carried forth into the classrooms as it would all but revolutionize not only our thought process on the role of visual creation, but our perception of our reality as well. One is deeply saddened however as we realize how we have seemed to regress rather than progressed in that area in our society's educational role. One absolutely maddening fact however, is the that this current edition omits the a crucial drawing to which she constantly refers on its cover;

something the publisher should be taken to task for sure. She ends on a phenomenological note, finding it a pity that the word `reverie' is no longer a part of the language of psycho-pathology for painting, like analysis, provides a safe setting where one can be indulged in its grace and produce the same subsequent and ultimate effect for the person who looks at it. Great for an educator interested in the arts, probably a bit stale for the professional analysts of today and a bit too naive for those in the professional arts.

This is one of my all-time favorite books. Reading it slowly, I learned to see the interplay of relationships in which no firm line is drawn between objects, and so to see beauty. I learned that wrapping my imaginative body around my experience is essential to loving and knowing reality. The author sees her struggle to paint symbolized in her key painting of a parrot, that part of us taught in schools to regurgitate, as it angrily fights to protect the treasure of imagination which lives within us.... She compares the eagle-eye view--wide and expansive-- with the narrow focused view emphasized in our schooling.

"Ultimately this books calls into question the separation of self from other, of feelings from things, and the distance between inner and outer worlds, and explores art's unique ability to transcend these divisions." -- John Houck on Marion Milner's "On Not Being Able to Paint" [Read the full review on the Art Book Review:\[...\]](#)

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