

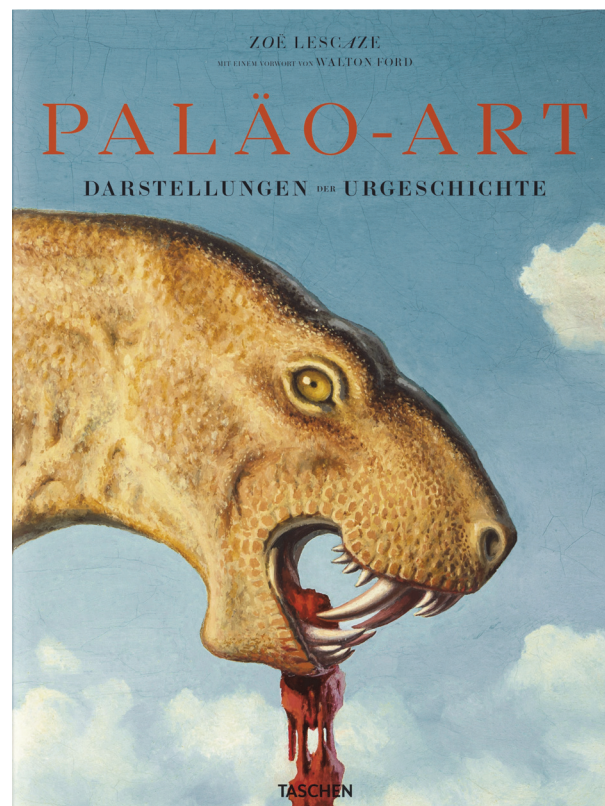
## Paleoart: Visions of the Prehistoric Past

Reviewed by Mark P. Witton

*Paleoart: Visions of the Prehistoric Past*. 2017. Written by Zoë Lescaze and Walton Ford. Taschen. 292 pages, ISBN 978-3-8365-5511-1 (English edition). € 75, £75, \$100 (hardcover)

*Paleoart: Visions of the Prehistoric Past* is a collection of palaeoartworks spanning 150 years of palaeoart history, from 1830 to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This huge, supremely well-presented book was primarily written by journalist, archaeological illustrator and art scholar Zoë Lescaze, with an introduction by artist Walton Ford (both are American, and use 'paleoart' over the European spelling 'palaeoart'). Ford states that the genesis of the book reflects "the need for a paleoart book that was more about the *art* and less about the *paleo*" (p. 12), and thus *Paleoart* skews towards artistic aspects of palaeoartistry rather than palaeontological theory or technical aspects of reconstructing extinct animal appearance. Ford and Lescaze are correct that this angle of palaeoartistry remains neglected, and this puts *Paleoart* in prime position to make a big impact on this popular, though undeniably niche subject.

*Paleoart* is extremely well-produced and stunning to look at, a visual feast for anyone with an interest in classic palaeoart. 292 pages of thick, sturdy paper (9 chapters, hundreds of images, and four fold outs) and almost impractical dimensions (28 x 37.4 cm) make it a physically imposing, stately tome that reminds us why books belong on shelves and not digital devices. Focusing exclusively on 2D art, the layout is minimalist and clean, and the juxtaposition of certain images can create an almost filmic quality. Nowhere is this more obvious than the immersive opening pages. The first few page turns feature a blend of familiar and rarely seen palaeoartworks in high quality and



detail, unobscured by text and labelling. Contrasting styles, animal anatomies and colour schemes set the stage for the rest of the book, and the cinematic feeling deepens when "Taschen presents" appears below a giant *Pteranodon*. A further page turn reveals a huge foldout title, spreading the

1877 Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins' painting *Cretaceous Life of New Jersey* across your armchair, with the word 'Paleoart' above it in enormous red letters. You can almost hear a Max Steiner soundtrack playing as it unfurls.

It's hard to state how amazing the art reproduction is, and there is lots of it to savour. The image quality and colour reproduction is first class, and the scale of the book allows even familiar works to look sharper and more detailed than we're used to. Several classic paintings and murals were rephotographed for this project and the enhanced quality is clear. Works by Hawkins, Knight and Burian which are widely known through decades-old book reproductions or low-resolution internet images are especially striking for their clarity and vibrancy. The choice of artwork is necessarily selective rather than exhaustive, but it would be terrific to see follow up volumes with more historic palaeoartworks at this quality. The list of artists is impressive, though not all receive discussion in the accompanying text. Household names include Hawkins, Knight, Burian, Parker and Kish, and we also see work by lesser, or only locally known artists such as Wilson, Flyorov, Bystrow.

For many, the draw of *Paleoart* will be the inclusion of essentially unknown artwork, much of it from 20th century Russia. These offer a fascinating contrast to Western palaeoart from the same interval. As the West moved towards 'rigorous reconstruction' methods and widespread adoption of linear art styles, Soviet palaeoart retained distinctly vintage science and painterly approaches. Simultaneously, some of these artworks are far more expressive and artistically experimental than the grounded realist art of America and Europe. These largely unknown works are presented with the same high quality as the more familiar imagery and I'm sure palaeoart completists and scholars will consider this volume essential for these images alone. My only gripe about the presentation is that there is little logic between work mentioned in the text and its placement in the same chapter. Paintings can be separated from their discussion by many pages and, without figure referencing, finding them can be a chore. This is a minor quibble, however: it is difficult to imagine how *Paleoart* could make a grander visual impression.

Where *Paleoart* is less impressive, however, is the accompanying text. It provides a short and accessible 'highlights tour' of 150 years of palaeoart, with an emphasis on biographical details of most (not all) featured artists. Some aspects of the narrative are strong. The attempts to link palaeoart

with wider cultural and historic events are novel and interesting (although Lescaze's constant linking between palaeoart and global conflicts and oppressive regimes recalls a variant of Godwin's Law after a time); it does a good job of presenting palaeoartists as real people, not just names associated with paintings; and the concluding discussion about palaeoart's appeal and deficit of scholarship is frank and honest. The details of lesser known artists are welcome and will no doubt catalyse further interest in these forgotten individuals, and the interpretation of art styles, painting methods and so on are a useful addition to a literature dominated by science-led theoretical discussion.

The text becomes frustrating if you want more than a cursory overview of palaeoartistry, however. Those imagining a lavishly-illustrated thesis on palaeoart history (perhaps a flashy version of Rudwick's classic 1992 book *Scenes from Deep Time*) will be disappointed. *Paleoart* is ultimately a coffee table book, not an academic text or detailed popular science discourse. Despite its high cover price and niche topic, it has been written for a broad, non-specialist audience and it contains a number of errors and gaffes which will irritate learned readers. The use of archaic terminology ('pterodactyl', 'mammal-like reptile') and continued reference to dinosaurs going extinct at the end of the Mesozoic not only disconnects the text from modern palaeontological theory but recalls books written several decades ago. Errors include relatively forgivable matters of history (e.g. ascribing the recognition of dinosaur bipedality to Joseph Leidy, not Gideon Mantell) to more glaring mistakes that even non-specialists will pick up (such as the suggestion that dinosaur evolution only lasted 75 million years, presenting *Tyrannosaurus rex* as a Mongolian taxon, confusing plesiosaurs and pterosaurs in one image caption). It's surprising that greater care wasn't taken with basic reporting and fact checking given the obvious appeal of this book to a science-literate audience.

*Paleoart's* attempt to discuss palaeoart as a purely artistic endeavour is also of questionable success. The book provides satisfactory, if brief, discussions of techniques and influences for several artists, as well as their reception by contemporary and living scholars, and their influence on wider culture. But little attention is paid to the interaction between art and science and the development of a rigorous palaeoart methodology. Any animal artist (of extant or extinct species) knows that understanding anatomy is essential to producing great animal art, and yet virtually nothing is said

about how classic palaeoartists interpreted fossils and inferred their anatomy. Palaeoart is ultimately an artistic interpretation of science, so some amount of scientific philosophy and understanding must inform the palaeoartistic process. It's widely realised that palaeoart masters were not simply good artists, but also good at interpreting anatomy and rationalising convincing scenes of natural history from fossil bones. But *Paleoart* sidesteps this, treating the medium as largely defined by personal experiences and cultural influences. My suspicion is that the artworks of Zallinger and Burian were influenced more significantly by their understanding of animal anatomy and biology than their feelings towards World War II or the Iron Curtain, for example. Similarly, Kish's emaciated dinosaurs almost certainly reflect the convention of ultra-conservative soft-tissue restoration prevalent in late 20th century dinosaur art rather than cultural concerns over changing climates and extinction (contrary to *Paleoart's* narrative, Kish's fossil reptiles *always* look starved: they were not depicted like this as responses to extinction events). The result is that a lay reader could read *Paleoart* cover to cover and remain ignorant about how palaeoart is actually produced, and why some artists are heralded as masters of the technique instead of mere practitioners. As much as I like to admire *Paleoart's* attempt to frame the genre through culture and world history, its refusal to engage with any technical aspects means it only tells half a story.

*Paleoart's* text is also oddly blinkered and disconnected to other literature. A particular gripe concerns the disregard for palaeoartworks produced before or after the 150 year focus of the book. De la Beche's 1830 work *Duria Antiquior* is hailed as the starting gun of palaeoart history, and all preceding works are dismissed as backgroundless sketches unworthy of further attention. To the contrary, while *Duria Antiquior* was undoubtedly a milestone in the emergent field of palaeoart, we must recognise it as an evolutionary step rather than a revolutionary one. The true origins of palaeoart are a collective effort starting decades before, with important works including Hermann's pterosaur restoration from 1800; Cuvier's famous skeletal and muscle reconstructions of Palaeogene mammals from 1809, as well as his full body mammal reconstructions of 1822; Conybeare's tongue-in-cheek 1822 restoration of Kirkdale Cave and its hyenas; and Howman's bizarre 1829 fantastical painting of a pterosaur soaring over Dorset (his 'Noctivagous Dragon'). The early 1800s was a frantic time in palaeoart history with several signifi-

cant and influential artists and scholars developing the medium. Choosing one artwork as the genesis point of the genre seems unnecessary and creates a false impression of history.

Similar issues affect the conclusion, a discussion about the end of 'vintage' palaeoart in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The explosion of palaeoart and palaeoart scholarship that accompanied and followed the Dinosaur Renaissance is not mentioned, and only Ely Kish's work is present to represent the future of the medium. Kish certainly represents the next stage of palaeoart history relative to the other artworks in the book, but the future of the medium was defined by figures such as Robert Bakker, Jay Matternes and Gregory S. Paul in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, and their promotion of a more rigorous and scientific approach. These individuals and their impact on palaeoart is not mentioned, save for a slightly downbeat discussion about how tightening of palaeontological science lessens creativity and romanticism. Anyone suggesting modern palaeoart lacks romance or creativity is, frankly, just not looking at the right artists: individuals such as Stout, Willoughby, Henderson and Conway produce work just as evocative and creative as the old masters, but with a scientifically credible edge. Yes, a lot of modern palaeoart is uniform, predictable and repetitive, but this has been true of the medium since the 1800s.

Further scholarly issues include the omission of taxonomic names from many illustration captions, making it challenging to identify subjects in some restorations. Lescaze explains that some are not included because no such information exists, which is understandable, but why are the animals in better known paintings not identified? Identifying subject species in these artworks is critical to understanding their context, execution and credibility, and their omission limits understanding of the paintings. Greater detail and discussion would, of course, have made the book longer and more expensive, but it's already in a price bracket where most would gladly pay a little more for a more comprehensive, truly exceptional product, instead of a little less for a less useful one.

*Paleoart* is ultimately a slightly odd mix of a niche topic; a wealth of excellently presented art; generalised, detail-lite text; and a steep cover price. It's a little challenging to know who it is aimed at. The imagery, presentation and showcasing of rare art will make this an essential purchase for working palaeoartists, palaeoart scholars and collectors. These learned readers will perhaps also appreciate some of the artistic interpretation, but

they will be among those most irritated by the blinkered scholarship and factual gaffes. Students and younger palaeoart fans will be put off by the price, and they will find more detailed discussions of palaeoart history, as well as serviceable copies of the same illustrations, in less expensive tomes. Casual readers without preexisting familiarity with palaeoart will not notice *Paleoart's* shortcomings and could enjoy the book as a relatively light introduction to the genre, but how many casual readers will spend €75/£75/\$100 on a shelf-busting book about a topic they've had no prior interest in?

*Paleoart: Visions of the Prehistoric Past* is one of the best looking books I've ever seen, and deserves high praise for collecting and showcasing many classic, underappreciated artworks in such quality. The authors could not have done a better job on this front. For some, the reproduction quality of the paintings will be enough to justify the high cover price, but those seeking a deep and authoritative analysis alongside the wonderful presentation might be disappointed.