
REVIEWS

The Western Tradition. A 52 Program Course on Western Civilization. Annenberg/CPB Collection, 1989.

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The Western Tradition is a fifty-two part videotape series designed as a televised course in Western Civilization. The series is part of the Annenberg/CPB collection produced in cooperation with the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The course is taught and narrated by the noted historian Eugen Weber of UCLA. The course begins with "The Dawn of History" and concludes with "Towards the Future," though, because the series was released in 1989, some of the later episodes are already outdated.

Overall, the series can be seen as a lecture course that makes good use of visuals. The general pattern is of lecture followed by cutaways to narrated visuals. The lectures were taped in front of a live classroom, although there is no interaction between the class and the instructor. One of the great strengths of the series stems from the productions' association with the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The museum's vast collection provides the visual backdrop for many of Weber's lectures. Close-ups of sculpture, painting, and pottery are all weaved into Weber's narrative, although not always seamlessly. In addition to the frequent use of artwork, the series also makes good use of maps and graphics.

In general, the lectures in the second part of the course tend to be better organized and presented in a more dynamic fashion. Program 39 for example, "The Death of the Old Regime" is particularly good as Weber expertly explains the impact of the American Revolution on European ideas and politics. His metaphor of the revolutionary process being akin to a snowball, which rolls downhill and becomes an avalanche, also provides a simple and understandable framework for explaining the revolution. Art, theater, and music are also successfully included in the lecture as Weber discusses Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* in the context of revolutionary Europe. Episode 41, "The Industrial Revolution" and episode 42, "The Industrial World" are also noteworthy. Particularly impressive is the use of artwork and photographs to demonstrate the profound changes in daily and material life brought by the industrial age. These episodes are an excellent demonstration of how art can be integrated to explain complex historical changes and

the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection allows us to view the wealthy urban middle class enjoying life in a park as well as an impressionist's view of how smokestacks change the Western landscape.

Weber's lectures are delivered clearly and he speaks slowly enough to allow for copious note taking, but for a video course, the lectures could be improved on a number of points. For example, while Weber's main points usually become clear, they should be highlighted and introduced more deliberately. Key words and concepts could easily have been included as graphics to help improve the organization of the lectures from the viewer/student perspective. Another problem is that Weber's vocabulary is often too sophisticated, and students (even at selective universities) will no doubt on occasion ask themselves just what Weber means at times. Like all good historians, Weber makes analogies and brings out comparisons to highlight a given point, yet in many cases, Weber's comparisons require a fair amount of previous historical knowledge. Taken together, the above points raise the question of the intended audience for the course. Highly motivated students with a sophisticated vocabulary and previous historical knowledge will benefit greatly from the lectures in *The Western Tradition*, but many students, even those with a solid background in history, will find themselves frustrated and sometimes bored with many of the lectures.

A final problem worthy of note is that some of the concluding lessons are out of date. While ten years is hardly an eternity in history, the producers had the great misfortune of releasing the series in 1989, the same year that Europe was rocked by profound changes that almost no one predicted. As a result, many of the most important recent events, such as the collapse of the iron curtain, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the wars in Yugoslavia are not covered. Overall, *The Western Tradition* is a well organized, effectively conceived, and visually appealing series, yet for teachers of Western Civilization, libraries looking to improve their video holdings, and students interested in televised course, it is by no means indispensable. ✨