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Nationalism and French Visual Culture, 1870-1914

June Hargrove and Neil McWilliam (eds.)

Studies in the History of Art 68, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, Symposium Papers XLV, National Gallery of Art, Washington, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005.

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Since the turn of the millennium we have seen a spate of publications dealing with the relationship between nationalism and French visual culture at the end of the nineteenth century, a field that in the past had been overshadowed by studies of the avant-garde of the same period. These works have shattered any illusions we might have had about the Third Republic, in which the Dreyfus Affair and Action Française were often seen as aberrations in the otherwise gaily swinging France of the Belle Époque. Equally, they have demonstrated the ideological complexity of French nationalism, its overlaps with a variety of other forms of thought, including some that one would regard as belonging to the more liberal camp, which produced a mixture of such explosiveness as to threaten the foundations upon which the nation had rebuilt itself following the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War.

In all these publications, nationalist discourses are seen as intimately linked to, and given form in, a broad range of visual imagery. From ephemeral phenomena such as caricatures and broadsheets to monumental wall decorations and commemorative sculpture, the ghost of nationalism haunts French culture production in ways that would be almost laughable if its effects had not been so devastating. The pathos of the paintings of Detaille and the sculptures of Mercié may today strike us as absurd, but to the generations who grew up with them, they were a call to arms that made possible the mass self-sacrifice of the years 1914-18. This alone demonstrates that this material is worth taking seriously.

The most recent addition to this string of publications is June Hargrove and Neil McWilliam's *Nationalism and French Visual Culture*. Earlier volumes in the "Studies in the History of Art" series treating questions of nationalism and the visual arts (Forster-Hahn, Etlin) have proven their lasting scholarly value, and the same will no doubt be true of this one as well.

The objects dealt with in the fifteen essays are as varied as the forms of nationalism itself. Many of these works, and the debates surrounding them, are difficult to place, even for a specialist in late-nineteenth-century art. Fortunately, the editors have provided an overarching theoretical framework with the excellent essay by Michael R. Orwicz. Orwicz's critical assessment of the important secondary literature on the theme of nationalism and cultural identity is concise and illuminating, equipping even the novice with the means for understanding what follows, in particular his own examination of the image of the *Bretonne*. This combination of theoretical transparency, precise historical contextualization, and visual analysis characterizes the best of the book's contributions.

In "Qui vive? France!" June Hargrove sketches the ideological debates surrounding the monuments to the fallen soldiers of the Franco-Prussian War. Her examination of the progressive appropriation of these public memorials by the nationalist-revanchist faction, their transformation from calls to national unity into calls to arms, is fascinating. Instead of good republicans, the monuments bred blind hatred and helped inculcate the public "with the doctrine of patriotic martyrdom" that allowed the carnage of the First World War (74). The point is well taken, but the essay fails to take account of the possible meaning of the *stylistic* choices made by the sculptors and their patrons, in particular the use of a kind of hyperrealism (see fig. 22) and its role in conveying the ideological message.

The vicissitudes of the painted image of the war of 1870-71 is the subject of François Robichon's contribution. As with the public monument, here, too, we find "patriotic feelings based on popular sentiment" being overtaken at the end of the century "by the evolution of nationalist ideology" (83). Robichon charts the critical reception of the early pictures; the iconographic shift from the historical to the anecdotal as memories of the war receded; and

the resurgence of the genre with blatantly chauvinistic images depicting not episodes of the war, but the state of war itself as if in preparation for the bloodshed to come. Once again, however, there is no examination of the issues of style and format and the kinds of responses these may have been intended to elicit.¹

Marc Gottlieb's essay on the legend of the painter Henri Regnault is exemplary in this sense. His investigation into the commemorative practices that grew up around the artist encompasses a diversity of visual media, and examines how these functioned in specific contexts for specific audiences. He addresses the conflicting demands of realism and allegory in the painted depictions of Regnault's death; the power of the indexical in the artist's death mask, and its role in "a broadly scaled transfer of sacrality" that led to a new, republican cult of the war dead (114). The fate of Chapu's memorial to the artist at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, which initially helped to create a collective *artistic* identity designed to heal the wounded French nation, soon became the site of more generalized and virulent revanchist rituals.²

As several essays in the volume illustrate, the question of the "Frenchness" of French art was a burning one. The figure of Puvis de Chavannes played a crucial role in this discourse, as did the classical tradition from Poussin to David, often in dialogue with its opposite, "primitivism" from the medieval period to Maurice Denis. The ambivalence of this discourse, its protean and contradictory nature, is one of the book's core themes. Jennifer L. Shaw, Laura Morowitz, and Neil McWilliam treat the issue in depth, looking at the political and critical interpretations to which the art of the past was subjected, and its effect on the understanding of contemporary production. That reactionary ideologies can sometimes be linked with "progressive" forms of art, and that the appeal to tradition is not always a guarantee for acceptance by the conservative faction, is well demonstrated by the discussions surrounding the work of artists like Puvis and Denis. But what these essays really indicate is the sheer complexity of the nationalist cultural debate: in the context of late-nineteenth-century France, words as seemingly transparent in meaning as "tradition,"

“nature,” “reason,” “abstraction” or “realism” could take on connotations of extraordinary diversity and unexpected resonance, depending on who is doing the talking.

Within this cluster, the essay by Marie-Claude Genet-Delacroix should have taken pride of place. The distinction she discusses within the discourse between “national” and “French,” and the various meanings these concepts were given in the debates surrounding national heritage and modernity, could have provided a focused framework complementing that of Michael Orwicz. Unfortunately, the piece is written in a rather confusing style, with too much emphasis on details whose relevance remains unclear, leaving one with a plethora of information and no understanding of its practical implications.

Problematic in other ways is the essay by Gaetano DeLeonibus, “The Quarrel over Classicism: A Quest for Uniqueness,” which also treats the controversial and seminal theme of classicism. DeLeonibus is a professor of literature and his discussion is difficult to follow without highly specialized knowledge of the field. The information provided is of course pertinent to the issue at hand, but no link whatsoever is made to artistic production. It thus remains rather unclear what this piece is meant to contribute in a volume on *visual* culture.

Away from the art center of Paris, the essays of Raymond Jonas and Richard Thomson look at the issue of nationalism and visual culture in the provinces as well as the role of the regions played in various aspects of the debate. Jonas’ article treats a group of stained-glass windows in the light of the rise of the mass media, and examines how these windows functioned in the promotion of anti-Republican, pro-Catholic ideas. Like Gottlieb, he makes a convincing connection between the *form* of the works in question and their ideological message, as well as its transmission. Thomson, on the other hand, investigates the notion of regional versus national, and examines how various forms of regional production *contributed* to the Republican cause, while simultaneously resisting the idea of a centralized national culture. His examples include the enormous and public murals by Jean-Paul Laurens in the Capitole in Toulouse and, at the other end of the spectrum, the inlay and furniture work of Emile Gallé.

The remaining four articles are more monographic in nature: Jane Meyer Roos on Manet and Salon politics in relation to politics in general; Christopher Green on the patriotic features of Braque's early landscapes; and Mark Antliff on the aesthetic influences on George Sorel's political thought. Jorgelina Orfila's discussion of a series of artists' groups usually considered within the history of the avant-garde (but shown here to have more in common with the radical right) raises some interesting issues about the political origins of certain modernist praxes, but suffers from an overdependence on theoretical secondary literature whose value is not always clear, and an overuse of quotation marks, both of which are indicative of the author's insecurity on the terrain.

Overall, however, this is an excellent publication, which contributes a great deal to our understanding of this seminal period in the history of art. A major drawback, it seems to me, is the lack of a more international perspective; with two exceptions, the authors are all North American or British, employed or studying at universities in the US, the UK or Canada. Surely there are scholars elsewhere working on this subject? It seems an odd thing that "French nationalism and visual culture" as a topic of research has become more or less the sole property of the Anglo-Saxon art-historical tradition.

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¹ For a discussion of the ideological effects of realism in relation to these works, see the present author's "Gloria victis: Französische Malerei des Deutsch-Französischen Krieges," in *Bilder der Macht - Macht der Bilder: Zeitgeschichte in Darstellungen des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Stephan Germer and Michael Zimmermann (Munich: Klinkhardt and Biermann, 1997), 390-402; and "René Princeteau's *Dragoon* and the Depiction of the Franco-Prussian War," *Van Gogh Museum Journal* (1996): 145-65.

² On artistic identity and the healing process in post-war France see, among others, the present author's "Art knows no Fatherland": Internationalism and the Reception of German Art in the Early Third Republic," in *The Mechanics of Internationalism: Culture, Society and Politics from the 1840s to World War I*, ed. Martin Geyer and Johannes Paulmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 357-373.