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Auguste Bonheur's *La Sortie du pâturage* (The Return from the Pasture), 1861

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New Discoveries

Auguste Bonheur's *La Sortie du pâturage* (The Return from the Pasture), 1861

by John Sillevis

Hidden from public view for over a century, Auguste Bonheur's monumental *La Sortie du pâturage* (The Return from the Pasture) recently resurfaced at auction in London and is currently owned by the Galerie Michael in Beverly Hills, CA. Measuring no less than 254 x 406.4 cm (more than 8 by 13 feet), this bucolic scene was one of the successes of the 1861 Salon, where, for once, Auguste was not overshadowed by his famous sister Rosa, a painter of rural landscapes and cattle like himself. The most important work by Auguste Bonheur known to date, *La Sortie du pâturage* is admired for the grandeur of its conception, the skillful rendering of the animals, and the beautiful suggestion of space, light, and atmosphere. (fig. 1) The painting gives evidence that the artist's reputation may well have unjustly suffered from the celebrity of his sister, which was caused at least in part by her ability to overcome the limitations of her gender.



Fig. 1, Auguste Bonheur, *La Sortie du pâturage* (The Return from the Pasture), 1861. Oil on canvas.

[\[larger image\]](#)

Female artists had great difficulty obtaining a place in the hall of fame of French nineteenth-century art. They were not admitted to the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where the curriculum was focused on the ideal rendering of the human body, with an accent on the male physique. So if women wanted an artistic career of their own, they usually were restricted to a private education, to subject matter such as still life or small domestic animals, to media such as porcelain painting and watercolor, and to modest-sized pictures that could be executed in their small domestic ateliers. It was, therefore, exceptional that Rosa Bonheur managed to build a career on masculine terms, becoming a *peintre animalier*—a painter not of cats and dogs but of large animals like cows and horses, which she rendered, life-size, on enormous canvases such as *Plowing at the Nivernais* (1849; Paris, Musée d'Orsay) or *The Horse Fair* (1853; New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art).

When the prominent art critic Théophile Gautier visited the Paris Salon of 1861, he immediately noted the absence of Rosa Bonheur from the exhibition, and when discussing Auguste Bonheur's works he could not help comparing them with hers. Gautier noticed the strong resemblance of the styles of brother and sister, but he also detected Auguste's personal touch. The paintings of Auguste Bonheur indeed have a quality of their own. He places more emphasis on the landscape settings which are luminous and bright, and often give the impression of a clear summer day in the countryside. Like Rosa, Auguste lends a physical tangibility to his animals that makes one think of the cattle in Dutch seventeenth-century paintings, such as the famous *Young Bull* by Paulus Potter in the Mauritshuis in the Hague.

Auguste's large vision and emphasis on light contrast strongly with the more modest scope and subdued tonality of the landscapes by the painters of the Barbizon school. Jean-François Millet, Théodore Rousseau, Narcisse Diaz or Charles Jacque would never use such bright colors in their paintings of the Fontainebleau Forest, nor would they indulge in such detail. Auguste Bonheur was not a realist of the Barbizon type; he was not even a *peintre à Ganne*, one of the artists who spent some time in the famous inn of Père Ganne in the centre of Barbizon, the meeting point for *plein-air* students. Instead, his work, like that of his sister, bears a resemblance to seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, especially the works of Aelbert Cuyp and Paulus Potter.

Théophile Gautier's critique on the Salon of 1861 in *Le Moniteur universel* showed genuine appreciation of Auguste Bonheur's contribution; he praised the artist's realism and his bold and lively tonalities. However, it is clear that in the end Gautier preferred the work of Rosa Bonheur over that of her brother. Remarkably, he said that the works of Rosa distinguished themselves because of their firmer and more virile execution.

At the Salon of 1861 Auguste Bonheur showed two paintings in addition to *La Sortie du pâturage*. One was *L'Arrivée à la foire, Auvergne* (Coming to the Market, Auvergne); the other was *Rencontre de deux troupeaux dans les Pyrénées* (Encounter of Two Herds in the Pyrenees) which became part of the collection of the Marquess of Bristol. Auguste Bonheur was quite popular with British collectors who preferred his traditional and detailed style to the "unfinished" look of the Barbizon School. It is no wonder, therefore, that *La Sortie du pâturage* ended up in England, where several of his works have found a permanent home. The Wallace Collection in London, for example, owns the artist's *Souvenir of Rosenlauri, Switzerland* of 1860, one of the works made during Auguste's numerous trips. Not surprisingly, in view of the affinity of Bonheur's work to Dutch seventeenth-century cattle painting, his works were also collected in the Netherlands. The art dealer Vincent van Gogh, uncle of the famous painter, owned a *Le retour du marché* (present whereabouts unknown). It was sold at an auction of his collection held in the building of the Artists' Association "Pulchri Studio" in The Hague on April 2 and 3, 1889.

Trained in the studio of his father, Raymond Bonheur, who believed that landscape was the genre of the future, Auguste did not receive much training as a figure painter; his execution of figures does not rise to the level of his mastery of landscape and animals. However, his painting at the Salon of 1861 was awarded a First Class Medal and, thus, was included in a group of paintings that could be won in a lottery—a method developed by the French

government of that time to distribute modern art among the public. It was won by a certain Monsieur Leblois, a civil servant at the Chemin de fer de l'Est, part of the French Railway System. In the late nineteenth century it became part of the art collection of Sir Edward Bates of Gyrn Castle in Wales, together with another work by Auguste Bonheur, *Le Combat, souvenir des Pyrénées* (The Battle: Memory of the Pyrenees).

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Illustrations



Fig. 1, Auguste Bonheur, *La Sortie du pâturage* (The Return from the Pasture), 1861. Oil on canvas.
[\[return to text\]](#)