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book review of

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Uwe Fleckner and Thomas W. Gaehtgens, editors
De Grünewald à Menzel: L'Image de l'art allemand en France au XIXe siècle
Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'homme, 2003
497 pp; 140 b/w ills; 16 color ills; 48 Euros
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Founded in 1997, the Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte in Paris has rapidly become an important center of research on the artistic relationship between France and Germany from the Middle Ages through the twentieth century. The recent publication of a collection of twenty-three essays on the reception of German art in France during the nineteenth century confirms the Forum's interest, already established in its other publications, in the matrix of artistic, institutional, and critical voices as they relate to social practices.^[1] The book under review here, like its predecessors, reflects founding director Thomas W. Gaehtgens' firm belief that artistic interaction must be examined in both directions, that influence is never a one-way street, and that stylistic change and innovation are both stimulated by, and a catalyst for, aesthetic, political, and social debates.

Uwe Fleckner's introduction to this volume informs us of its intent to redress an imbalance in the perception of Franco-Germanic relations in the nineteenth century. For too long, he writes, too much emphasis has been placed on the exemplary role French art, artists, and institutions have played for Germany, which was assumed to be lacking in all three domains. "The fact that France in the nineteenth century took note of German art, and that German art played an important role in the image France had of its difficult neighbor, has been much less studied (p. 2)."^[2] If one expects, for example, a bellicose and hotheaded response to German art following the Franco-Prussian war, one may be surprised by the real fascination with the art of Grünewald and Holbein by post-1870 practitioners, including Jean-Jacques Henner, Edgar Degas, and Odilon Redon. Although certain critics, such as Charles Blanc and Charles Baudelaire, sweepingly categorized German art from Dürer to Kaulbach as meditative, philosophical, and therefore idea-bound, other writers perceived a more mystical underpinning. In particular, Joris-Karl Huysmans found in the German school, admittedly reduced to its "primitive" essence in the work of Grünewald and Schongauer, a spiritual practice that verged on mysticism, providing a welcome sanctuary from the more declamatory French academic approach to similar religious subjects.

The essays are divided into four thematic groupings: "The Search for German Primitives;" "The Vision of German Art in Literature and Art Criticism;" "The Presence of German Art in

France: Museums, Salons, and World's Fairs;" and "Artists' Dialogues/Dialogues of Contemporaries." This organization allows for a broad scope of methodological approaches, starting with the concrete questions of which works of German art were actually viewed by the French public in the essays by Mathilde Arnoux, Barthélemy Jobert, and Françoise Forster-Hahn. Historiographic problems of competing theories of what constituted "the German School," both past and present, are examined by Isabelle Dubois, Thomas Gaehtgens, Robert Scherkl, Julia Schmitker, and Rachel Esner. The historiographic issues are complemented by the consideration of how French artists such as Ingres, David d'Angers, and Degas responded to specific German examples in essays by Uwe Fleckner, Pierre Wat, and Pascal Griener; and personal friendships between French and German artists are examined in the work of Claire Barbillon, Peter Kropmanns, and Élisabeth Kohler. The formation of highly personal and/or influential images of German art in the work of writers such as Charles Baudelaire and Joris Karl Huysmans was the subject of further essays by Hendrik Ziegler and Christian Heck.

Perfectly aware of the traps of national ideologies and the risks of over-generalization and stereotyping that often accompanies them, the authors of this volume carefully track the sources and modifications of ideas of "German-ness" as it moved through the century. At the same time, the authors analyze the overwhelming tendency of French writers to interpret German art through the mediation of physiological, cultural, and historical clichés that remained surprisingly tenacious in spite of the dramatic changes in Franco-Germanic relations. The resulting image of German art included, according to Fleckner, "a penchant for the depths of philosophy, a predilection for sentimental themes as well as the serious imprint of melancholy and heavy thinking, ... wanting to communicate a thought or a moral, more than to express beauty and sensuality (p. 4)."

Ironically, some critics, such as Charles Blanc, condemned German artists for exhibiting these qualities, but praised the French-born Chenevard for these same reasons. In exploring these contradictions, Robert Scherkl's essay on Blanc asks whether Blanc's criticism of German art was "justified" (p. 181). This rather unfortunate choice of words, implying an absolute standard against which we can now objectively evaluate Blanc's remarks, masks a much more subtle and important analysis that shows how Blanc's criteria for judgement shifted according to the genre of painting he considered. Genre painting, for example, was not held to the same standard and therefore found greater praise in his eyes. Similarly, Blanc's understanding of Raphaëlesque classicism informed his reception of painters such as Wilhelm von Kaulbach, Peter von Cornelius, and Ludwig Knaus.

This type of analysis marks one of the strengths of the essays by Christian Heck (on Huysmans) and Hendrik Ziegler (on Baudelaire): the authors carefully reconstruct the intellectual climate that informed each writer's thinking. The importance of well-known figures, such as Madame de Stäel, in creating a baseline interpretation of Germany is of course acknowledged. However, the essays in the volume also bring to light—although without fully exploring the impact—important early art-historical articles and books on German art, such as those by Hippolyte Fourtoul and Émile Verhaeren.^[3] Indeed, one question raised by the essays in this volume is just how the interaction between different types of cultural mediators, including art critics, art historians, novelists, and poets as well as artists themselves, contributed to the shape of an image of German art in France. Isabelle

Dubois' article on the transposition of German-born art collector and theorist Sulpiz Boisserée's arguments about the primary role of the Cologne school in the formation of German painting is exemplary in this respect. Her analysis is equally persuasive in exploring how later challenges to Boisserée's theories found their roots in nationalist arguments over the origins of the Gothic style, long a sticking point between French and German critics, or the critique of the more recent school of Nazarene painting.

More important than exposure to books and articles on the formation of an image of German art were the opportunities for face-to-face confrontation with actual works of art. Whether this happened in the context of voyages to Germany, where both public and private collections provided French travelers with opportunities for first-hand investigation, or as part of the experience of visiting French museums, fairgrounds, and Salon exhibitions, primary observation of original works of art provided ample material for comparisons. Not surprisingly, French critics of many aesthetic stripes frequently found French painters superior to their German counterparts, and used the comparisons as an opportunity to vaunt the accomplishments of their fellow citizens. It might have been interesting to consider whether this pattern held equally true for medieval and Renaissance artists as it did for contemporary practitioners. The volume documents the fascination with German primitives, without considering it in relation to the simultaneous debates over the status of the French schools of the same period.^[4]

The richness of a more open-ended and international approach can be found in Sabine Fastert's fascinating and original approach to this theme. Her essay on Rome as a meeting site for contemporary German and French artists and critics provides a surprising detour onto Italian soil, where attachments to national identities become distilled in the face of cultural 'otherness'. Engagement with the revival of fresco techniques, as advocated by the Nazarenes, (the works of two of which are superbly reproduced in the color plates) became the occasion for a reconsideration not only of the role of Italian primitives in the French understanding of the Renaissance, but also for Delécluze's re-articulation of French classicism, grounded in the precepts of Poussin and David, and therefore hostile to a Germanic gothic revival. Mathilde Arnoux argued that the inclusion of German artists in the collection of the Musée de Luxembourg, the first foreigners to be represented there, derived less from Karl Bodner's or Arnold Böcklin's nationality than from a perception of their work as deriving from French schools of painting. Even though the government of the Second Empire spent large amounts of money acquiring paintings by Ludwig Knaus and Adolf Schreyer, and rapidly displayed them in the Musée de Luxembourg, the Louvre consistently ignored German old master painting, accepting it when offered as a gift or purchasing it only when offered at rock-bottom prices. Nevertheless, all the works purchased or received through donations were placed on display, becoming an important source for artists and critics.

The essays in this volume bring a great deal of new archival material to light and raise important questions that remain to be considered in more detail. Numerous studies cite unedited letters, museum archives, personal memoirs, and newly discovered works of art, maintaining the European tradition for carefully researched studies based on primary sources. The richness of the array of methodological approaches nonetheless prevents in-depth analysis of any one approach, and leans somewhat heavily towards independent

monographic studies: fifteen out of twenty-three essays focus on an individual artist's or writer's engagement with German art. The result is that one can read freely in the volume. The essays' contribution lies in the massive accumulation of new, and often fascinating, information that they bring forward for consideration, rather than in a synthetic analysis of the material presented. In this sense, the choice of the singular "l'image" in the volume's title strikes me as somewhat incongruous, as the volume clearly articulates the plurality of approaches and attitudes that prevailed at different historical moments or in differing aesthetic milieus.

As scholars pursue further investigations of the issues raised in this volume, it will be important to re-apply the interpretive complexity commonly found in studies on French art criticism to the body of material regarding German art. If the authors were acutely conscious of the dangers of generalizations about questions of German nationalism and identity, they nonetheless reveal a tendency towards vague, sweeping statements about France. The French public, and with it French critics, was not itself unified into a mythic national voice that shared aesthetic values or agendas.

Excavating the specificity of a writer's or artist's particular engagement with a discrete moment of German art must necessarily be coupled with the avoidance of a tendency to speak in generic terms about political tensions between the two countries. At times, authors in this volume assume a broad knowledge of the history of the two countries on the part of the reader, and the intricacies of a given historical encounter are thus left tantalizingly beyond the scope of the essays. In one example, we are told that painter Jean-Jacques Henner's formal reaction to Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* was "highly inspired ... by the political situation of Alsace (p. 47)," without any specific reading of one of his works to demonstrate how the particular politics of Alsace shaped the subjects or styles that he chose. A similar example can be found in the handling of Jules Michelet's interpretation of German renaissance artists. The French historian, Thomas Gaehtgens argues, represented Dürer, Holbein, and others "as heroes who fought for liberty and the realization of the individual confronted with the domination of the nobility and the Church (p. 243)." Such a characterization was certainly not innocent however. Gaehtgens' analysis of Michelet would benefit from a discussion of how the French critic projected his own bourgeois republican values onto his German subjects. Further, this raises the much larger and as yet unexamined question of how Michelet used works of art in his conceptualization of history, in the specific politics of the French historian's ideological agenda. These are minor reproaches, however, given the overall richness of this volume. That each of the essays could stand a much deeper development and analysis is a testament both to the wealth of interesting and under-studied topics raised here, and to the creative vision of the *Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte*, which supports and defines new fields of investigation tied to the cultural production of both countries. As the Forum grows institutionally, one hopes that they will extend their research projects beyond the borders of the two countries that first logically defined it. Their methodologies would apply fruitfully to other international comparisons, and their findings could be more fully integrated into a broader understanding of nineteenth-century artistic culture in Europe and beyond.

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[1] For example, see Uwe Fleckner, ed., *Prenez garde à la peinture: Kunstkritik in Frankreich, 1900–1945*, (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1999); Thomas Gaetgens, ed., *L'Art et les normes sociales au XVIIIe siècle*, (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'homme, 2001); Andrea Pophanken, ed., *Die Moderne und ihre Sammler. Französische Kunst in deutschem Privatbesitz von Kaiserreich zur Weimarer Republik*, (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001); and Matthais Noell, ed., *Das Bauhaus und Frankreich, 1919–1940*, (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002).

[2] All translations from the French are my own.

[3] Fortoul published *De l'art en Allemagne*, 2 vols., in 1841-42; Émile Verhaeren's articles appeared in the periodical *L'Art moderne* in the 1880s. The essays also reference numerous articles published on German art in *L'Artiste* and the *Gazette des beaux-arts* that contributed to the available source material French critics used in formulating their opinions.

[4] The competing theories on the French renaissance, particularly in relation to Italian art, were recently explored in depth by Geneviève Bresc-Bautier and Pierre Vaisse at the colloquium *Histoire de l'histoire de l'art au XIXe siècle en France*, sponsored by the Institut National de l'Histoire de l'Art, held from 2-5 June 2004. (See <http://www.inha.fr/recherches/pdf/progr-coll-juin2004.pdf> for the conference program.) The integration of the arguments made in this volume about the German school—itsself involved in a complex mediation with Italy—would have allowed for a truly European consideration of the issues viewed here through the prism of the French reception of German primitives.