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book review of

The Modern Portrait in Nineteenth-Century France by Heather McPherson

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Heather McPherson

The Modern Portrait in Nineteenth-Century France

Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2001

286 pp.; 6 color ill., 101 b/w ill.; index, bibliography; \$85.00 (hardcover)

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In this study, Heather McPherson examines French portraits made after the advent of photography. Arguing that portraiture is central, not peripheral, to the crisis of representation in the age of mechanical reproduction, she finds that it became a "contested site of representation," with painters and photographers seeking various paths of renewal. Traditional tensions between the portraitist's objective aim—to record a physical likeness—and more subtle subjective aims came to the fore. McPherson relates these tensions to shifting conceptions of identity in nineteenth-century France in six "case studies," an eclectic mix of artists and subjects: Gustave Courbet, the Comtesse de Castiglione, Sarah Bernhardt, Paul Cézanne, Jacques-Emile Blanche, and Edouard Vuillard. Placing these figures in their cultural context—and with ample attention to such literary connections as Charles Baudelaire and Marcel Proust—McPherson argues persuasively that portraiture is a significant barometer of change in the modern age.

In chapter one, "Courbet and Baudelaire: Portraiture against the Grain of Photography," McPherson focuses on Courbet's portrait of Baudelaire of about 1848–49 (Musée Fabre, Montpellier) to show how Courbet "made the portrait a crucial testing-ground for the expressive capacities of realism" (p. 15). The Baudelaire is deliberately unlike a photograph, showing more concern for the connotations of the occupational symbols (book and pen) than the denotation of physical likeness. The figure is somehow indeterminate. McPherson considers photographs of Baudelaire, which show his famously protean appearance, but sees a greater influence from caricature, admired by both Courbet and Baudelaire. But Courbet adds painterly expressiveness. (Daumier would employ a similar hybrid in his paintings.) McPherson concludes—as have Linda Nochlin, T. J. Clark, and others—that it is never wise to define Courbet's realism too narrowly.

Chapter two, "La Divine Comtesse: (Re)presenting the Anatomy of a Courtesan," turns to Verasis de Castiglione, whose images, created for her own satisfaction and the delectation of her friends, have now become familiar to students of photography. Briefly the mistress of Napoleon III, the comtesse dazzled and antagonized Parisian society with theatrical costumes documented in photographs by Pierre-Louis Pierson. Disgraced in 1857 for her presumed connection to an attempt on the emperor's life, the comtesse became a virtual hermit who indulged her narcissism in ritual photographs that amount to a "fictive autobiography and memory theater," anticipating fin-de-siècle aestheticism (p. 75).

McPherson relates this *oeuvre* to the Renaissance tradition of the *bella donna*, an individual portrait that is also a generalized ideal. In the context of the Second Empire, the comtesse's photographs show the rise of the courtesan in the growing culture of spectacle, where costume and masquerade often created—or obscured—identity. Almost every photograph of the comtesse is remarkable for its mask-like expressionlessness. McPherson sees this, on one level, as an indication of the emptiness of the comtesse's life, but she also sees a

significant resemblance to photographs of Charcot's patients at Salpêtrière, published in *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (n.d.). Hysteria, as popularized by Charcot in his well-attended (and carefully stage-managed) demonstrations, became a "medical and cultural metaphor" for extremes of feminine sensibility, and the facial expressions identified by Charcot as the phases of hysteria came to function as pathological signs. McPherson associates the comtesse's mask-like images with paranoia and depression, although she does not provide specific parallels with the *Iconographie*, nor is it clear whether the comtesse was, as "director" of her portraits, making a deliberate statement of alienation and revolt against her fate in an unsympathetic society or revealing her pathology unawares. In any case, the comtesse remains the subject of a unique photographic record that testifies to the use of photographs (and a few paintings) to explore and commemorate identity.

Chapter three, "Sarah Bernhardt: Portrait of the Actress as Spectacle," deals with a figure who without question used portraits to create her own public myth. McPherson stresses the contradictions in the career of this mesmeric figure who combined classical technique with the cheap tricks of melodrama. A visual artist as well as an actress, Bernhardt understood the power of the image. McPherson's analysis of the many different kinds of images Bernhardt used to publicize her professional and private lives is particularly strong. This case study has a good deal to tell us about women and the arts in late nineteenth-century society. Bernhardt challenged gender assumptions with her many "trouser" roles; she also embodied the *femme fatale* and the *femme moderne*, representing the polar extremes of her dual nature. In time an icon of art nouveau, Bernhardt is a prototype of the mass-media "star."

Chapter four, "Cézanne: Self-Portraiture and the Problematics of Representation," focuses on Cézanne's self-portraits (the topic of McPherson's master's thesis at the Sorbonne). These are surprisingly numerous, comprising more than fifty paintings over forty years. McPherson sees them as significant in Cézanne's perennial researches into perception, and she presents examples that mark crucial junctures in his career. Self-portraits from his impressionist period (1872–77) balance representation with concern for the tactile and expressive qualities of paint (the author tends to deny deep psychological significances). The "constructive period," of about 1878–87, shows experimentation with the contours and volumes of self-portraits as a "sort of mnemonic device" to explore and assert his artistic identity. The final "synthetic" period, 1888–1906, resulted in far fewer self-portraits (only one is illustrated, along with a portrait of Cézanne's gardener) and is a "reductivist" phase in which the artist "thinks in paint" about his unrealizable artistic goals—a paradigm of modernist experimentation.

In chapter five, "Jacques-Émile Blanche: The Écriture of a Portraitist," McPherson looks at an artist who was a central artistic figure in his day but who has since been neglected. Like Boldini and Sargent, Blanche has been dismissed as a society portraitist, but McPherson argues that he should be taken seriously as an artist and writer who tried to "modernize the portrait while maintaining its traditional social mandate and humanistic content" (p. 146). The first of his "literary effigies" was his 1892 portrait of Marcel Proust, discussed here as a personal tribute to a friend but also, with its exaggerated formality, brilliant surfaces, and strong value contrasts, as a "multifaceted aesthetic statement" (p. 155). McPherson contrasts symbolist methods (represented here by Eugène Carrière and Odilon Redon) with Blanche's

efforts to renew the portrait by finding his own "écriture" or "distinctive syntax" involving modernist methods of simplification and surface effects. Yet efforts to show Blanche as a modernist seem strained, and the examples given—portraits of Aubrey Beardsley and Tamara Karsavina—lend themselves to a more straightforward view of Blanche as a traditionalist with some experimental tendencies.

The cross-fertilization of literature and the visual arts is further explored in chapter six, "Proust and Vuillard: The Artist as Metaphysician." These two figures shared a vision of art as the transformer of everyday reality through memory and imagination, and, like Proust, Vuillard, whom McPherson sees as the principal model for Proust's protagonist Elstir, used suggestion and evocation in his endlessly revised versions of everyday reality. McPherson focuses on four of Vuillard's late portraits of artist friends—Aristide Maillol, Maurice Denis, Ker-Xavier Roussel, and Pierre Bonnard. Not popular with most critics, these portraits exemplify Vuillard's (and Proust's) methods of arriving at the truth by using symbolist equivalences and correspondences to suggest the complexities of perception.

While McPherson's study does not set out to be a chronological survey, readers may question her choice of case studies. The introduction speaks of the fundamental shift in the nineteenth century from the portraits of Ingres, who struck a balance between realist detail and idealizing vision, to those of Van Gogh, whose innovative portraits explore various paths of renewal for the traditional portrait form (p. 11). Readers might reasonably expect a chapter on each of these artists, as well as a chapter on Gauguin, Redon, or another early symbolist. The concluding chapter on Proust and Vuillard, centering on portraits done in the late 1920s and 1930s, falls outside the announced time frame and, while it explores a significant connection, lacks the resonance of other more representative "cases."

The book is well documented, and the copious notes, while sometimes distracting, do provide a useful guide to the critical literature. The text is occasionally repetitious and encumbered with fashionable academic language of discourse, paradox, and "the gaze." Nevertheless, *The Modern Portrait in Nineteenth-Century France* delivers on its promise to show that portraiture remained at the center of artistic practice after photography might be thought to have usurped its function. It also demonstrates convincingly that portraiture is a significant tool of a modern, media-oriented society. Portraits, as McPherson observes, "form a unique human record...that registers the fragmentary traces of individual lives and connects the past, present, and the future" (p. 12).

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