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book review of

Nineteenth-Century European Art by Petra ten-Doesschate Chu

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Petra ten-Doesschate Chu
Nineteenth-Century European Art
New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003 (hardcover)
Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003
544 pp.; 231 b/w ill.; 345 color ill.; \$75.00
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Writing textbooks is something few scholars bother with anymore, although at one time it was considered a mark of prestige. Contrary to widespread belief, textbooks don't make much money, with a few well-known exceptions, although ironically the art book division is said to be the only one showing a solid profit at Prentice-Hall these days. Furthermore, most scholars don't know how to write well for the student and popular market. It takes considerable skill to write scholarly content without sounding like an academic on the one hand or dumbing down the content to the level of Sister Wendy on the other. Indeed, there is relentless pressure from college textbook publishers to write at about a sixth- or seventh-grade level, which is demeaning to authors, although every college and university professor today has to cope with the poor learning skills, not to mention the poor working habits and lack of motivation among many students. These problems have become so pervasive that even faculty at the Ivy League schools complain about them. Finally, most scholars have more important projects that are nearer and dearer to their hearts: the ones that get them tenure and promotion. As a result, a majority of textbooks are not written by ranking scholars and consequently aren't particularly good. Every teacher is familiar with the frustration of finding a good book to teach from, not against, as so often happens. At the same time, as a textbook writer myself, I can say it is a real challenge to write a book when there are so many different schools of thought that a consensus viewpoint is impossible to achieve. A revealing example of this dilemma is Preziosi's recent Oxford book on Aegean art, which is devoted almost entirely to discussing the widely divergent views on every conceivable topic. I am reminded of the old Right Guard commercial about the hung jury, where the foreman says: "Six chose scented, six chose unscented." Agreement, it seems, is harder than ever before.

The appearance of Petra Chu's new book on nineteenth-century art, published by Prentice-Hall and Harry N. Abrams, was therefore a pleasant surprise when it showed up in my campus mailbox. Dr. Chu is one of the foremost authorities on European art of the period. How, I wondered, had Prentice-Hall managed to lure her into doing such a book? It turns out that she was inveigled into writing the book by Eve Sinaiko, who is now head of publications at the College Art Association, and Julia Moore, who was Managing Editor of the textbook division at Harry N. Abrams, Inc. before it was bought by Prentice-Hall. Ms. Sinaiko edited one of the editions of Janson's *History of Art* and we collaborated on a little book about the art of Vietnam veterans. Ms. Moore was also my chief editor for more than a decade at Abrams, and is one of the most intelligent and professional editors in the business.

The book is surprisingly expensive for the quality of production. It goes for \$75.00 (faculty get a 10% discount), the same price as H.W. Janson and Robert Rosenblum's book on nineteenth-century art, which is far better printed. To be fair, the latter was introduced in

1984, when it seemed comparatively expensive, but it has long been amortized, so that it is cost effective to maintain the standards of quality. Albert Elsen's book, newly revised in 2002, is only \$50, but is not superior in production values. Stephen Eisenmann's book, newly revised by Thames and Hudson, is roughly the same price as Chu's. The problem with Chu's book lies in part with the paper, which these days is the single most expensive part of book production (disregarding the often outrageous costs of images and reproduction rights, which have spiraled out of control to the point of outright price-gouging in some cases). It is not that the printer isn't capable of doing better. Laurence King of London has turned out some of the finest work around. But the black-and-white illustrations have far too much contrast, while the color plates are often rather muddy, though on the whole they are at least acceptable.

Nevertheless, there is clearly a need for such a book. Lorenz Eitner's venerable survey is still around, but although useful, it really has not changed much in approach over the years, and frankly feels a bit old-fashioned now. Janson/Rosenblum is, in many ways, the most interesting and intelligent book written on the subject, but even though I have a natural bias in its favor, the text is now twenty years old and sorely in need of revision, which Prentice-Hall has said is in the offing. Alas, it omits architecture altogether, which is its most serious weakness, despite the pioneering text on sculpture and excellent painting survey, both of which are very well written and offer unique insights. Finally, there is Eisenmann's book. It is a fascinating compilation of essays by mostly top-notch scholars on a variety of issues that are in step with post-modern theory in their issue-oriented approach. But despite its undeniable merits, this is a most difficult book to teach from, because, in the final analysis, it lacks cohesiveness. Furthermore, it is difficult for most students to read and comprehend. Finally, it lacks any discussion of sculpture and architecture, both important fields that are basic to understanding the century. It is therefore best left to seminars for advanced students who can benefit most from its in-depth approach. There are other books out there as well, but they do not have the same significance. One example is Fritz Novorny's Pelican book, which, although cheap at \$30, is quirky and uneven. Another is John Canaday's *Modern Painters*, which was a very good book for its time, as was the little unillustrated paperback he wrote as part of *The Lives of the Painters* series. But time has simply passed both of them by. For these reasons, a well-written, thoughtful and up-to-date book at a reasonable price is naturally welcome.

The virtues of Chu's approach are apparent right up front. She takes care to explain things that other authors often take for granted, especially the content of pictures, where the story may be unfamiliar or have connotations that are no longer readily accessible to modern viewers. For example, she gives a thorough account of Boucher's *Mars and Venus* and Fragonard's *The Secret Meeting*. Likewise, she provides a detailed explanation of Madame du Pompadour as a patron of the arts. Of particular importance here are Chu's paragraph on John Locke's theory that knowledge is derived from sensual experience and its impact on French theorist Jean-Baptiste Dubos, who argued that the basis of painting was sensual pleasure. Every now and then one wishes that Chu had expanded on an important point. She could well have noted how different Dubos's thinking was from the intellectual classicism of Charles Lebrun that formed the program of the French Academy during the seventeenth century, which isn't even mentioned until seven pages later. Also, she notes that members of the aristocracy were only too happy to leave the gilded cage of Versailles for

private hôtels in Paris, without telling us that Louis XIV built Versailles to maintain control over them so as to prevent a repeat of the rebellion known as the *Fronde*.

Chu generally does an admirable job of describing works of art. Although we have all cut our eye-teeth on this exercise, it remains one of the most difficult things to pull off well. A good example is her analysis of Tiepolo's *Institution of the Rosary*, which is excellent. Oddly enough, in this instance, she fails to tell the reader what the rosary is and its place in Catholicism, although for the most part she takes pains to take theology into account.

Chu alternates between a somewhat generalized treatment of such subjects as English portraiture and more detailed discussions of patronage, for example. Indeed, she reveals herself to be a first-rate contextualist. Thus, her chapter, "The Classical Paradigm" is one of the best in the entire book, because the subject plays to her strength. Even those familiar with Enlightenment art from the pioneering books by Mario Praz, Robert Rosenblum, and Hugh Honour, not to mention more recent ones like David Irwin's, will find a wealth of fascinating material, particularly in the introductory background. She also discusses the subject of J.-L. David's *Oath of Horatii* more thoroughly than any other writer I can recall. I can't resist pointing out a particularly amusing typo that the proofreaders somehow missed: "...the Romans selected three brothels [*sic!*] to do the fighting..." Ahhh, the images this slip conjures up! The only weakness is the failure to mention how the *Death of Socrates* departs from historical reality or the fact that Socrates himself was already seen as a martyr for truth in Greek times, an important point for the Enlightenment view of him. The passages on Canova and Flaxman are superb, but the section on "The Neoclassical Home" is far too brief to do justice to the subject. Chu is, in fact, very much oriented toward painting, perhaps inevitably so, as it is painting that still dominates our view of the era, even though there is a great deal of important material in other visual arts and theater and music, which shared key philosophical ideas that bound them together. To take but one example, Diderot was an important playwright whose theories about drama affected his judgment of painting.

The sections on David's school and the reaction against his teachings is generally very good. I do think that Chu rather beats around the bush in discussing the "androgynous" paintings of Girodet and Jean Broc. While she avoids the mistake of asserting that these artists were practicing homosexuals, the discussion of the "homosocial" studio is a bit clumsy even for so-called "gender" studies. Others such as Rosenblum have dealt more directly and pithily with the homoerotic appeal of such works.

I like Chu's treatment of Goya very much. In a relatively brief space she manages to do full justice to this great artist, which is no mean achievement. One niggling point: she ought to have delved a little further into the background of the commission for the *Third of May*, which casts the artist in a very interesting and rather different light; also, more might have been made of the suggestive relation between the painting and the print by Miguel Gamborino showing the execution of five Franciscan monks. Nevertheless, this is inspired writing, representing Chu at her very best.

It is rare to find such an in-depth overview of German romanticism in surveys. Only William Vaughn and, to a lesser degree, Fritz Novotny, have previously managed it. The introduction to the chapter is insufficient, however. There is much more to be said about the

birth of German romantic art and especially Wilhelm Schlegel's contribution, for his prophetic lectures provide virtually a road map of German culture through the mid-twentieth century. Also, the important link to theater and music is avoided. The rest of the chapter, however, is superb, and it is heartening to see such a full and balanced discussion, not just of Caspar David Friedrich, but also Philipp Otto Runge and the Nazarenes.

Less evenly balanced is the following chapter dealing with British landscape painting. Chu devotes quite a lot of space to Thomas Girtin, the pioneer of the English romantic landscape, which he certainly deserves, but the omission of John Cozens and John Cotman is unforgivable in my opinion. In comparison, the sections on Turner and Constable are rather brief and superficial; they are workmanlike but the subject is evidently not close to her heart.

The core of any such book must be French romanticism. Fortunately, once she returns to French art, Chu is again in her element, and this is, on the whole, a fine chapter. I disagree with her on one key point, and that is the issue of whether Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus* exemplifies romanticism. Regardless of whether the artist wished to be thought of as a classicist, a close reading of contemporary French art criticism makes it quite clear that his work crystallized the French concept of romanticism in painting. Previously, it had been discussed almost entirely in terms of Madame de Stael's book *On Germany*, based largely on Schlegel's lectures, which is not mentioned at all.

The following chapter on the July Monarchy is better yet. Indeed, it is one of the very best in the entire book. Thorough and beautifully written, it is beyond reproach in my opinion. Indeed, it is among the best pieces of writing on the subject I have ever read.

Although it is understandable that Chu divides her chapters on French art according to political changes, as is the current fashion, the results can be rather choppy. It is one thing to find Delacroix and Ingres spread over two chapters, which somewhat dilutes their contributions. But the division of realism between two chapters on the Revolution of 1848 and the Second Empire makes hash of Courbet and Millet. Chu then pops in a section at the end of the Second Empire on "Courbet, Manet, and the Beginnings of Modernism" that seems to have no proper context, particularly since the question of what is modernism is begged. Furthermore, Chu isolates Baudelaire and states, I believe quite incorrectly, "Although Baudelaire took little notice, there were few artists during the Second Empire who did paint modern urban life on a larger scale. One was Courbet...." How, then, does one account for Baudelaire's inclusion with his mistress in Courbet's *Studio of a Painter*? At the time Baudelaire wrote "The Heroism of Modern Life" as part of his lengthy review of the Salon of 1846, Courbet had yet to emerge as an artist and Manet was only fourteen. Yet Baudelaire's ideas were clearly of great importance to both painters. Thus, Chu's comment makes no real historical sense. Finally, the rise of photography is far too brief to be meaningful. I hope that Chu rethinks this chapter for the next edition, which will inevitably come, probably quite soon. In the meantime, I would recommend reading Joseph Sloane's brilliant but unjustly neglected book *French Painting...from 1848 to 1870*, which is more successful in traversing this terrain.

Fortunately, the chapters on German and Austrian art, Victorian Britain, and the Great Expositions are splendid. Only Rosenblum and Vaughn have addressed this territory with such success, so Chu is in excellent company. Equally exemplary are the chapters on impressionism, post-impressionism, and conservative counter trends. Others have done as good a job surveying this familiar material, but none have done it better. As an aside, I was delighted to see Bouguereau's *Young Girl Defending Herself Against Eros*, which belongs to the university in Wilmington, North Carolina, where I worked for the past eight years before having to take a disability retirement early this year. I knew the painting would be included, because I was the one who had approved the reproduction permission. Still, it looks stunning in the book, even if the subject is a bit silly.

"When the Eiffel Tower Was New" begins with a fabulous discussion of that monument and other exposition architecture. But for the life of me I can't figure out why "The Triumph of Naturalism" was not made into a separate chapter. The two subjects are conjoined by the thinnest of rationalizations in "The Fine Arts on Exhibit," and frankly, it doesn't work. It would have been far better to expand the treatment of architecture and make it a full chapter in its own right. Taken on its own, however, "The Triumph of Naturalism" is first-rate. Chu relies quite heavily on the pioneering work of Gabriel P. Weisberg, which is sometimes controversial and has been unjustly pilloried by the "true believers" of Linda Nochlin's school, who adhere to a far narrower definition of realism based almost exclusively on Courbet's program. The two approaches are hardly as incompatible as is often thought, however, and Chu successfully blends the best of both. In this regard, she presents by far the most balanced and thorough view of realism and naturalism of any nineteenth-century survey. She rightly perceives them as beginning as a narrow movement, which quickly spread into an ever-broader international trend that was expressed in different national styles.

Chu also relies partly on Weisberg in discussing *art nouveau* as part of the chapter "France During La Belle Epoque." At first it seems startling to see Gauguin and his followers separated from the rest of the post-impressionists, but in the context of the chapter it makes perfect sense. Chu masterfully integrates Gauguin, Emile Bernard, et al into the broader symbolist movement and details the former's relation to Albert Aurier and other writers. Symbolism usually ends up being badly mangled in most books. This is one of the few overviews that I can honestly recommend. (Rosenblum is also excellent. Edward Lucie-Smith's little paperback is surprisingly good. Also essential is Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony*, which remains a classic.) By comparison, the discussion of Rodin seems rather flat. There is no real feeling for the work. Chu simply hasn't taken the full measure of the man and the artist. Both Janson and Albert Elsen, who wrote quite a lot about Rodin, are far more successful in treating him.

Happily, the book ends on a high note with "International Trends c. 1900," which presents an excellent survey of *art nouveau* architecture, the succession movement, and even John Singer Sargent as part of late nineteenth-century international naturalism. Only devotees will be disappointed that more space was not allotted to a favorite artist or movement. Although necessary eclectic, like the art itself, the chapter manages to integrate the material in a most satisfying manner that makes one realize why art had come to a dead end by about 1900

and why a new modern art had to arise, although it took another seven years for that to happen.

I want to make it clear that I came to praise Caesar (or perhaps I should say Cornelia), not to bury her. As I know all too well, it is inherently impossible to create the perfect book. Most of the disagreements I have are the usual differences of opinion that exist between scholars and need not be taken too seriously. Only four or five are important, and none of these is fatal. They are truly intended as constructive criticism, nothing more.

The bottom line is that this book is at present the best survey of its kind out there. As a teaching tool, it is neither too long, nor too short; too academic, nor too lightweight. Most college and university professors should find it a flexible instrument that allows them to build their interpretation of the period while providing a solid and valuable resource for students. If Janson/Rosenblum were brought up to date, it would provide the only serious challenge in terms of quality, and even then, one would have to add a good book on nineteenth-century architecture in order to be as comprehensive, which would raise the cost considerably higher than Chu's single volume. My personal recommendation is Barry Bergdoll's fine *European Architecture 1750–1890*, published as a part of the *Oxford History of Art* series, even though it necessarily omits Gaudi and *art nouveau*. Even combining Bergdoll's book with others from Oxford would not provide as good an overview as Petra Chu has achieved, and would still leave gaps that can't be filled by the same series. When all is said and done, Chu's book stands at the head of its class. A second edition will provide the opportunity to make it even better.

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