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book review of

William Bouguereau by Damien Bartoli, with Frederick C. Ross

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Damien Bartoli, with Frederick C. Ross,
William Bouguereau,
2 vols. (Vol. 1: *His Life and Works*; Vol. 2: *Catalogue Raisonné of his Painted Work*).
New York: Antique Collectors' Club, with Art Renewal Center, 2010.
Vol. 1: 518 pp., 164 b/w illustrations, 360 color illustrations; notes; select bibliography; index.
Vol. 2: 367 pp., 235 b/w illustrations, 494 color illustrations; select bibliography.
Retail price: \$350 (2 vols., hardcover, slipcase)
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Recent visitors to the Musée d'Orsay in Paris will have found five monumental William Bouguereau canvases on display: *Equality before Death* (1848), *Dante and Virgil in Hell* (1850), *Compassion!* (1897), *The Onslaught* (1898), and *The Oreads* (1902). These represent the very beginning and very end of Bouguereau's career and encapsulate his diverse modes, religious and secular. All recent gifts to the state in lieu of inheritance tax, they mark a major addition to the Orsay's holdings of Bouguereau's art and they give the artist a museum presence of a kind he has never before enjoyed. Grouped in a relatively small gallery (*salle11*), they make a tremendous impact. The lurid *Dante and Virgil in Hell*, on the main sightline, is already well on the way to becoming a cult favorite, judging by visitors' engrossment before it.

This new public visibility at the world's most popular museum of nineteenth-century European art, combined with the publication of the two-volume monograph and catalogue raisonné by Damien Bartoli, with significant contributions by Frederick Ross, should at the very least encourage a serious new scholarly look at the painter, who was neglected by art historians, like many of his *pompier* or "academic" peers, for much of the twentieth century. Certainly, Bouguereau's stature as a celebrated Salon painter, a dedicated teacher at the Académie Julian, and an unusually active member of the official art establishment in the late nineteenth century provide justification enough for the enterprise. And given the major retrospective exhibitions and catalogues recently devoted to his contemporaries Jean-Léon Gérôme and Alexandre Cabanel, a thorough reconsideration of Bouguereau seems particularly timely, if not indeed overdue.^[1]

Published by the Antique Collectors' Club in conjunction with the Art Renewal Center, the catalogue and accompanying monograph are the result of many years' devoted labor, as is typical of such productions. The project would not have come to fruition without the initiative and support of Frederick Ross, committed Bouguereau collector, convener of the Bouguereau Committee, and the force behind the [Art Renewal Center](#), which proselytizes for the academic tradition of figure painting as incarnated by Bouguereau and other once-popular Salon painters. Damien Bartoli, the art historian who headed the project, was able to avail himself of the archives of Mark Walker, the pioneering Bouguereau scholar who died in 1993. Tragically, Bartoli himself passed away in 2009 before seeing his work through to publication. The dedication and efforts of all three men are to be commended. Some three decades in the making, the catalogue marks a major milestone in Bouguereau scholarship and is a long awaited follow-up to the landmark catalogue of the 1984-1985 monographic exhibition in Paris, Montreal, and Hartford.^[2]

Bartoli and Ross decided to limit the catalogue to the finished decorations and the signed and dated easel pictures (along with their many reductions). The focus therefore is on the pictures that remain the most marketable and sought after among collectors and dealers today. Drawings, studies, sketches, and cartoons are unfortunately omitted, so that the reader is afforded little direct insight into Bouguereau's working procedures—an omission for which a short chapter in the monograph compensates to some degree.

Within its self-prescribed limits, the catalogue nevertheless represents a quantum leap over earlier partial catalogues and lists of the artist's work. The more than 800 works catalogued here (representing a significant expansion of the documented oeuvre) are conveniently numbered according to date (1850/01, 1850/02, etc.), easing the chronological perusal of the book. A great majority of them are beautifully illustrated, either with high quality color images or with historic black-and-white photographs. Where professional photography was unavailable or impractical, the authors have usefully supplied their own amateur photos.

Individual entries consist of relatively detailed provenance, exhibition history, bibliography, and brief notes providing additional historical, biographical, and anecdotal information. In compiling provenance, Bartoli has made good use of account books and sales records, sometimes going so far as to include auction houses' estimates as well as the sale prices, thus allowing the reader to track Bouguereau's market closely. Bibliographies unfortunately are quite thin and mostly limited to standard sources. Given Bouguereau's participation in the

Paris Salons for more than five decades, one wishes that Bartoli had compiled a much deeper representation of Salon criticism, for which there exist excellent bibliographies, particularly for Bouguereau's crucial formative years during the Second Empire.^[3] More frustratingly, entries suffer from missing dates, incomplete references, and a great deal of typographic sloppiness. Commas, periods, semi-colons, and colons are used inconsistently and create considerable difficulties for the reader trying to parse information accurately. The impression, despite the lavishness of the volumes, is of a catalogue hastened through its final stages of production without the oversight of a thorough copy editor. This might also explain the surprising lack, at the end of the catalogue, of an index of proper names and of works by title or subject, making targeted searches unnecessarily difficult.

Granting that the catalogue, as evidenced by choice of publisher, is chiefly aimed at the collector for whom such a work can serve as a glossy keepsake and potential guide to acquisition, one might nevertheless question the rationale for a hardcopy print edition from a scholarly point of view. The list of Bouguereau paintings in public collections appended to the catalogue includes 187 paintings. This is a significant number, but it accounts for only about 20% of the total number of works catalogued. Anyone familiar with auctions of nineteenth-century European art will not be surprised by this. Bouguereau is a mainstay of the contemporary market, with few major sales passing without offering up one or several of his works. The catalogue for the May 5, 2011 sale at Sotheby's in New York, for example, features no less than *eight* Bouguereau paintings.^[4] Given such robust movement on the market, an online catalogue that could be periodically updated seems the much more logical option. As it is, the catalogue raisonn   is already out of date. Exacerbating this problem is that the catalogue, so long in development, seems not to have been thoroughly updated before its printing. The entry for *The Battle of the Centaurs and Lapiths* (no. 1853/07), for instance, gives the owner as "Private collection, France," despite the fact that the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts acquired the painting several years ago (a fact that is registered in the photo credit beneath the picture in the monograph volume) (1:107). Similarly, while the list of works in public collections was updated to include the recent acquisitions of the Mus  e d'Orsay mentioned above, the individual catalogue entries still indicate "Private collection, France." Were the catalogue to live online, such errors and inconsistencies could be easily rectified.

Turning to the ample monograph, the reader will find a wealth of biographical information presented for the most part in a clear, readable manner. We are given a year-by-year account of Bouguereau's life and career, certainly the most thorough to date, followed by useful summary chapters recapping "the private man," "the oeuvre," "the painter's craft," and "the teacher." The narrative admittedly becomes monotonous at times, devolving into a laundry list of works, but this ultimately reinforces the picture of Bouguereau as an extremely disciplined artist who dedicated as much of his life as possible to the studio routines of drawing and painting. Fortunately, the text is enlivened by numerous historic photographs and generous excerpts of correspondence. Bouguereau's description of his life during the Siege of Paris in the winter of 1870–1871 is particularly fascinating and will resonate with the recent work of art historians on this period (1: 190–209).^[5]

The target audience for the monograph, however, is not the critical art historian. The text is primarily addressed to the amateur seduced by Bouguereau's consummately finished and supremely reassuring art. It is likewise addressed to those figurative painters working today

who wish that they had been pupils of Bouguereau (I am paraphrasing) and to an imagined "public at large," ignored by allegedly prejudiced critics and art historians, who simply love Bouguereau and testify to that love with millions of hits on the Art Renewal Center's website (1: 452).

As a consequence, the rhetorical stance of the monograph is one less of sober scholarly assessment than of reverent hagiography and defensive apology. It echoes the sort of mythologizing artist's biographies common in the nineteenth century. This resonance is unsurprising given Bartoli's heavy reliance on Marius Vachon's 1899 monograph, a text that Bouguereau and his second wife Elizabeth Gardner played a direct role in shaping and editing (a fact acknowledged only in passing). In Bartoli's telling, Bouguereau remains very much intact as the virtuous hero. The author identifies persistently and possessively with him as "our artist," and secondary characters are divided clearly into those who recognized his talents and supported him, and those who opposed him. The reader is likewise positioned as the intimate companion of Bouguereau's moral and artistic *Bildung*, and we are constantly being invited, in the text's more sentimental moments, to imagine or suppose how our hero must have felt or thought at various key moments in his life.

Artistically speaking, the mature Bouguereau is presented as the 'Master' with a very literal capital M. No praise is too great or fulsome for his undeniably virtuosic paintings, which are upheld as the apogee and culmination of the Academic Tradition (also always capitalized)—a tradition defined as a set of hard-won skills, at the center of which was the command of the human figure, and as a set of humanist ideals assigning art the noble mission of expressing the full "range of human thoughts, ideas, concepts, beliefs and values" (1: 286). These artistic qualities and values are not understood historically, as culturally bound and contingent, but rather are upheld as timeless, universal absolutes, as valid for art today as Bouguereau felt them to be in his time. For the author, such absolutes are articles of faith, not of reasoned historical argument, and they result in embarrassing instances of hyperbole. Bartoli repeatedly insists that Bouguereau's paintings approach "...perfection on every level" (1: 259) and stand comparison to the greatest works "...in the whole of art history" (1: 238). His true peers, we discover, are to be found only among the likes of Botticelli and Raphael (in idealizing representations of the female nude) or Rembrandt (in the psychological penetration of his characterizations). More remarkable still, the author insists, is the fact that Bouguereau painted not just one or two masterpieces, with which any other artist of his day would supposedly have been more than satisfied, but that he was miraculously able to sustain the high level of his production (falling off only slightly in his last few years), creating "...a series of masterworks, the quantity, quality, originality and emotional power of which remain unequalled to the present day" (1: 281).

Both Bartoli and Ross (it is not always easy to distinguish their voices) appear to have bought wholly into Bouguereau's gracious, tender, sentimental, and erotic fictions, the rapt description of which—usually relegated to gratuitously extended captions—furnish the most unfortunate passages of prose in the book and detract from the comparatively measured tone of the biographical narrative. The argument boldly advanced is that Bouguereau's art is essentially a noble humanist art, one deeply touched by the movements of democracy and social justice stirring in the nineteenth century. He is lionized as the painter-peer of Victor Hugo, who for many had indeed become the "moral conscience" of the French nation. Bouguereau's

portrayals of comely, but vulnerable peasant girls, springing supposedly from his sympathy for the plight of common man and the less fortunate, ultimately translate into a message of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and the interpretive burden placed on the pretty peasants, poor things, is heavy indeed (1: 263). Stretching credibility even further is the claim that Bouguereau's pictures, imbued as they are with a generous new spirit of empathetic humanity, are also the first to portray girls and women as complex emotional beings (1: 459). Out of respect for Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* among others, let me simply characterize this sort of thinking as wishful. And turning only briefly to Bouguereau's overtly erotic work, we are asked to allow that they too proceed only from the most "generous, pure and noble" feelings. His nudes are thus the celebratory expression, "uncontaminated by [feminist?] cynicism," of "life, nature and beauty" divinely manifest in the youthful female form (1: 297).

Suffice it to say that the monograph offers a generally uncritical view of Bouguereau's art, one that admits only of the elevated emotions, guiltless pleasures, and comforting thoughts that it was calculated to produce. The reader encounters much splitting of hairs and special pleading on behalf of the artist along the way. His paintings may be sweet, but never are they "sugary." They may be erotic, but they are never "titillating." And while they are profoundly expressive, they never devolve into maudlin sentimentality (breathless asides from the authors notwithstanding). Certainly there is nothing meretricious in his figures' direct, doe-eyed engagement of the spectator. Rather, this trademark formula of the artist manifests the bond of "love and trust" between viewer and pictorial subject and arouses our noblest instincts to protect and shelter the young and vulnerable (1: 323).

By championing Bouguereau on the moral grounds of "humanism," and by inducting him into a pantheon reserved for the greatest artists of all time, the author effectively decontextualizes and dehistoricizes his work. For all the art historical scholarship that has dealt with the fraught issues surrounding the representation of the peasantry and rural labor in the second half of the nineteenth century in France, the reader should not expect here any considerations of class and gender, which are occluded by the rhetoric about common humanity (shared by wealthy male collectors and unthreatening adolescent girls in picturesque dishevelment). Likewise, the naïve contention that Bouguereau's painting is mainly the product of his irrepressible need to "express all of his deepest feelings" effectively sets aside many of the pressing contingencies that undoubtedly affected his production—those of market and genre, for instance. Future Bouguereau scholars will do well, since it is scarcely touched upon here, to explore how the painter situated his work in the competitive field of contemporary Salon painting. Addressing how Bouguereau related to Alexandre Cabanel, Ernest Hébert, Paul Baudry, Jules Eugène Lenepveu or Jules Bastien-Lepage will ultimately be much more interesting than subjective qualitative comparisons to Raphael and Rembrandt. Likewise, a more probing consideration of Bouguereau's exhibition strategies, his abandonment of history painting, and his negotiation, along with many artists of his generation, of the eroding boundaries between genres in the face of a democratizing audience for art, would have gone a long way in creating a nuanced picture both of his considerable achievement and, yes, its real limitations.^[6] A major part of this story will necessarily focus on the manner in which Bouguereau responded to market demand and yoked his production to reproduction, both through studio copies and through new technologies of mass reproduction. The painter's business relationship with Goupil & Cie, only briefly discussed, will be of central concern here, as will be his conquest of Gilded Age America. To state simply that he was more popular in the United States than in France "as if to illustrate yet again the axiom that no man is a prophet in

his own land"(1: 272) is to ignore the roles played in this popularity by the international marketing network of dealers like Goupil & Cie, and the readiness of flush novice collectors eager to convert their industrial wealth into cultural capital.

Also remaining for future scholars will be a balanced consideration of the Salon criticism and its potential effects on Bouguereau's output. Criticism enters the present text only cursorily with excerpts from positive reviews. Bartoli refers to the mounting negative criticism Bouguereau faced, but then dismisses such criticism as the product of envy and jealousy, coming from those allegedly embittered by their own failed careers in the fine arts and "...whose whining was in proportion to their frustration" (1: 288). Even more insidiously, such criticism is seen as a symptom of the emerging modernist paradigm, which seems to have involved a nonsensical "...bias against things which were upbeat or optimistic" or that manifested extraordinary technical skill (1: 214).

Indeed, throughout the text modernism is an infernal bogeyman, a byword for gross artistic iniquity. Openly disdainful of most art produced from Impressionism onward, the author is guilty of caricaturing modernism with the same dismissive ignorance to which Bouguereau's art was subject once it had fallen out of fashion. In some passages, modernist painting is characterized as wholly nihilistic and anarchic, bent on the "...destruction of technical skill and the negation of real subject matter"—as if Paul Cézanne, Georges Seurat, or Paul Gauguin were not engaged in highly sophisticated technical gambits of their own (1: 286). Elsewhere, it is presented cartoonishly, as being chiefly concerned with demonstrating painting's essential flatness. We are told that any three year old, *pace* Clement Greenberg, could tell us that (1: 341). In a similarly rancorous spirit, Bartoli suggests that the triumph of Impressionism was ultimately a hoax perpetrated by a cynical cabal of dealers and artists intent on making a quick buck: quick easy painting = quick easy money (1: 453). Such moments in the text are maddening and distract from the book's claims to serious scholarship. Unfortunately, such claims are further weakened when the author advances seemingly reasonable arguments against modernist prejudices towards "academic" art. Bartoli rightly points out, for example, that it is a modernist myth that the Salon did not encourage creativity or that the academic tradition was not capacious and did not allow for a great variety of styles and subjects. He likewise stresses that it is a modernist myth that the Impressionists never showed at the Salon and that they were not indebted to academic tradition for aspects of their painterly practice. The problem is that no one who has paid attention to art historical scholarship over the last three or four decades would ever maintain these "myths." The modernist straw man set up here is a flimsy one.

In the final analysis, the value of the biography and catalogue raisonné, which is considerable on account of their rich documentation and illustration, is regrettably compromised by the text's shrill anti-modernist rhetoric. This too is the rhetoric of the Art Resource Center, which seems to have co-opted Bouguereau's painting as a grinding stone for a political axe that it wields in an academic culture war far less relevant today than it was a generation or two ago. One hopes that future scholars, while building on the research informing the present work, will arrive at a more critically balanced assessment of Bouguereau's substantial achievement, freed of the vested emotional and financial interests in the master's work all too evident here.

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Notes

[1] See Laurence des Cars et al., *The Spectacular Art of Jean-Léon Gérôme*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum; Paris: Musée d'Orsay; Milan: Skira, 2010); and Michel Hilaire et al., *Alexandre Cabanel, 1823-1889: la tradition du beau*, exh. cat. (Montpellier: Musée Fabre; Paris: Somogy Éditions d'Art, 2010).

[2] See *William Bouguereau, 1825-1905*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée du Petit Palais; Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1984).

[3] See Christopher Parsons and Martha Ward, eds., *A Bibliography of the Salon Criticism in Second Empire Paris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[4] See Sotheby's, New York, *19th Century European Art, Including an Important Collection of Sculpture*, May 5, 2011, lots 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 31, 33, and 34.

[5] See particularly Hollis Clayson, *Paris in Despair: Art and Everyday Life under Siege (1870-71)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[6] Some important work has already been done to begin addressing these questions. See, for instance, Alain Bonnet et al., *Devenir peintre au XIX^e siècle: Baudry, Bouguereau, Lenepveu* (Lyon: Fage, 2007).