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book review of

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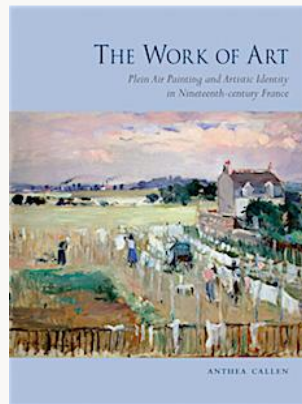

Anthea Callen,
The Work of Art: Plein-air Painting and Artistic Identity in Nineteenth-century France.
London: Reaktion Books, 2015.
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In *The Work of Art: Plein-air Painting and Artistic Identity in Nineteenth-century France*, Anthea Callen has taken on an ambitious project. Her book, spanning the long nineteenth century, examines the physical and technical methods of art making for plein-air painters from Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes to late Camille Pissarro and Paul Cézanne. Callen argues that it is the process visible in their paintings—the artists' *work*, and specifically their discernible labor—that drove developments in modern painting in the nineteenth century. Callen writes that painters consciously aligned themselves with craftsmanship, in opposition to academic painting, embracing the physical, material, and working class associations of craft practice. The author's own expertise as a painter informs and enhances her discussion of materials. This generously illustrated publication is organized in four chapters.

The first chapter, "The Origins of Plein-air Painting to 1850," contends that work *en plein air* was a major source of stylistic development that influenced modern painting even beyond the landscape. Additionally, Callen argues that the rise in popularity of plein-air painting spurred innovations in paint and materials, rather than the reverse—new materials popularizing work outdoors. Callen establishes a lineage of the practice, citing Roger De Piles' *Cours de peinture par principes* (1708) as describing in the early eighteenth century "the key techniques of outdoor painting considered radical among the Impressionists" (37). De Piles' work influenced the writings of Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes, whose 1799 treatise on the importance of outdoor study can be traced as the starting point for legitimizing plein-air painting in the nineteenth century. Callen also cites the importance of Claude-Joseph Vernet, whose popularity among royal patrons elevated the status of French landscape painting, and who likely directly influenced Valenciennes to paint outdoor oil studies. In turn, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, who studied under Valenciennes' students, was the "living link between the Neoclassical landscapists

and the Impressionists" (35). These artists were utilizing plein-air painting as a means of study for finished studio works. However, Callen notes that Théodore Rousseau sold his oil studies. He also mounted an 1867 exhibition of studies and *ébauches*, which Callen describes as studio paintings made from the studies that "hav[e] the freedom of a plein-air *étude* on the scale of a finished *tableau*" (51). John Constable and J.M.W. Turner's place in this history could have been addressed in more detail. The style of Constable's large, freely-brushed plein-air oil sketches is still visible in his finished landscapes, which Callen writes "caused a sensation" at the 1824 Paris Salon but does not explore further as a part of the timeline of plein-air painting in this chapter (35). The influences for French painting *en plein air* could be the subject of a book in itself (several existing sources are noted in n4, 276), and so the narrative in this chapter reads as somewhat abridged.

This publication devotes thorough attention to the equipment and process of painting outdoors, and the remainder of this chapter is largely devoted to the history of materials. Callen utilizes plentiful illustrations of plein-air painters at work, including paintings, photographs, prints, and caricatures. This compilation, along with numerous photographs and advertisements of nineteenth-century artist materials, is a valuable resource for scholars. The author details the easels, seats, and paintboxes specifically designed for portability; describes optical devices to aid in truthfully rendering nature (some, like the pocket-sized *miroir noir*, more plausible for toting outdoors than others); identifies improvements in paint tubes over the century (though she writes that many artists continued to use paints sold in pig bladders, the more traditional vessel for portable colors, until the new tin tube containers became more affordable around 1860; she also debates the originally-intended market for tin tube paints, as one firm touted the new paints' "cleanliness and lack of smell" as perfect for the amateur, indoor "lady painter") (70); and enumerates the types of paper and canvas, preparation choices, and mounts available for the plein-air artist. The latter choices had particular import for the final appearance of the work: different grounds dried at different speeds and affected the colors of the upper paint layers in different ways, changing even over the longer life of the work. In addition to their relative long term stability, white and pale grounds, Callen writes, "provide in-built luminosity" (102). Further, she argues, these grounds visually flattened the paint surface, disrupting the illusion and calling attention to the physical qualities of the applied paint. Pale grounds would be the preparation of choice for plein-air painters from Corot to the Impressionists and Georges Seurat.

Chapter Two, "*Maître* Courbet: The Worker-Painter," examines the meaning and influence of Gustave Courbet's knifed paint application, particularly for the work of Cézanne and Pissarro. Courbet's use of the painting knife, in combination with his subject matter and the contemporary political environment, was both stylistically and politically radical (as has been detailed in the existing literature). The knife—in Courbet's case, possibly of his own custom design for painting—was a direct affront to the academic brush and to the polished surfaces it created. This is not to say that Courbet eschewed the brush entirely; Callen details his various modes of paint application, including rag, sponge and brush. Callen argues for the importance of close looking to differentiate between types of paint application in assessing the meaning of these artists' works. She writes that in adopting Courbet's techniques, Cézanne and Pissarro knowingly took on their freighted meanings: Courbet's "technical audacity combined with the characteristics of the provincial 'outsider' to signal artistic *authenticity*: truth to the self, to an artistic vision and to one's materials" (121). Their reference to Courbet would have been particularly pointed after the Commune, in the context of Courbet's exile from France. Both

Cézanne and Pissarro, of course, had "outsider" status; Cézanne relished the provincial persona that he fashioned in Courbet's example, and Pissarro was a Danish-born (the island of St. Thomas) Jewish immigrant who espoused revolutionary political views. While including a brief description of other Impressionists' use of the knife, Callen emphasizes the connection to "otherness" to highlight these three artists in particular (110–13). This chapter and the third chapter read as a case study than a reflection of the full picture, which detracts somewhat from a reader's appreciation for the meaning of knife painting as a practice in this period. In particular, the influence of Édouard Manet's use of the knife—how this contributed to the artistic identity he constructed and differed from that of Courbet—feels absent in this section.

Callen writes that, combined with adopting the "tool" of the knife for paint application, Courbet's self portraits—particularly in *The Meeting* (1854) and *The Painter's Studio* (1854–55)—consciously take on the role of worker. *The Meeting* displays Courbet toting the various equipment necessary for work *en plein air* (including, Callen argues, the parasol support used as a walking stick). The artist wears working clothes, certainly dressed less formally than his patron Bruyas or Bruyas' servant. In *The Painter's Studio*, Courbet wields his signature knife and brushes at work on a landscape in the studio—not outdoors. Callen writes that these elements combine to emphasize the "landscape as a representation, but also as something he crafted, its painted physical objectness" (143).

With the context of Courbet established, the third chapter, "Cézanne, Pissarro and Knife Painting," extends the discussion of the previous chapter to focus more intently on the works of these artists. Callen considers the ways in which each used the knife: selectively, for certain subjects and effects, and generally not all-over (with Cézanne's knifed portraits a notable exception). She writes that Cézanne and Pissarro tended to use the knife to "construct form," in a more "orderly and systematic" way rather than evocatively like Courbet (181, 183). Even non-knifed works take on some of the geometric characteristics of knifed ones, such as Cézanne's *Avenue at Chantilly* (1888); works with greater variety of tones aligned side by side were easier to control using multiple brushes rather than a more unwieldy painting knife that had to be continually cleaned. Cézanne's method, Callen writes, was a style of mark-making that lay bare the "internal process," the final painting "a representation of his empirical observation and recording, of the *painting process*" (192). In other words, the work of creating the picture was manifest on the canvas, rather than hidden through careful "finish."

The final chapter is primarily a reading of Gustave Caillebotte's painting *Laundry Drying on the Banks of the Seine, Petit Gennevilliers* (ca. 1892), which depicts laundry on a clothesline blowing in the wind. Caillebotte owned a residence in Petit-Gennevilliers, a small village across the Seine from Argenteuil. Callen argues that *Laundry Drying*, thought by some scholars to have been completed outdoors due to a poplar tree bud found dried in the paint, was actually a studio work informed by Caillebotte's outdoor studies. Callen uses comparisons to works at Argenteuil by Caillebotte and by Claude Monet, as well as visual analysis of the multiple paint layers in this work, to support her argument. Callen writes that the trees in *Laundry Drying* are not poplars, and points to Caillebotte's *Boathouse at Argenteuil* that more clearly depicts poplar trees. Further, based on the appearance of the trees in full leaf in *Laundry Drying*, the work was painted in midsummer, not the spring budding season. The paint layers demonstrate the artist's reworking the scene over time, wet over dry, so the work was not completed in one sitting. The work's size suggests a studio painting, compared to Caillebotte's known paintings

en plein air. Finally, the oil studies for this work predate the large-scale painting by four years (if the date is correct), suggesting that Caillebotte utilized the studies to complete the work in the studio at a later date.

Callen concludes the discussion of *Laundry Drying* with reflections on the larger theme of the labor of art-making. Utilizing comparisons to other Impressionist images of laundry and laundresses, Callen writes that this work "reveals laundry as suburban hard labour: despite the sunny gaiety of the setting, the hundreds of identical whites . . . signal manual labour on an industrial scale" (242). Rather than including the laborers themselves in the painting, Caillebotte depicts the signs of their work, the white garments. Callen contends that Caillebotte's own labor of painting is made visible in his paint strokes, imitating "the laundresses' wooden batts flaying the dirty linen" (245). If this is a painting of labor, it is quite different from Caillebotte's paintings of men at work (the two versions of *The Floor Scrapers*, *The House Painters*)—Callen does note this, without elaborating. However, this reading of *Laundry Drying* suggests that Caillebotte created almost a tribute to these unseen laborers by the Seine, and what is missing is perhaps more of an acknowledgment of the issues of class at play in this analysis. Why would Caillebotte, especially as the wealthiest of the Impressionist painters, have had such an appreciation—almost empathy—for the work of the laundresses, and indeed symbolically connected his own work to theirs (in Callen's argument)? And what does it mean for Caillebotte to depict the workers' efforts through the clean laundry, rather than with an image of the women workers themselves? It was not entirely convincing that Caillebotte had not used the scene of laundry on the line as a pleasing view for plein-air experimentations, rather than a reflection on labor.

The final pages of the book deal with Seurat and Neo-Impressionism, as well as a discussion of the available palette colors chosen by plein-air artists of the second half of the nineteenth century. This section is a useful reference for scholars investigating a painting's technical details and color choices made by artists; Callen touches on issues of expense, colors changing over time, manufacturer error, when new colors were introduced, and other factors that affect a painting's appearance.

This publication could have benefited from a concluding section. The range of art discussed and the time period under review is vast, and a return to the overarching themes would have been useful to tie together the many sections. I have noted a few points below that may have warranted further (or future) detail.

Callen acknowledges in the introduction that this examination privileges the male artist: "In both ideology and practice the new *plein-airisme* enabled male painters to carve out an almost exclusively masculine territory" (12). As it has been well detailed in previous scholarship, plein-air painting presented a formidable obstacle for female artists: excursions into "the field" required an escort to maintain propriety, not to mention donning more practical clothing and managing equipment that were considered unsuitable for women. However, given Callen's central argument regarding the centrality of "craft," perhaps greater attention to the gendered associations of this term would have been appropriate. She treats this briefly in the introduction: "on the one hand it was a label deployed to sideline women's achievements as actual crafts professionals . . . On the other hand for the woman painter the label was a means to downgrade her status as a fine artist" (18). So why was the knife-wielding male painter willing

to accept this association? How did male painters co-opt and privilege "craft"? In addition to the question of class associations (academic painter versus craftsman), consideration of gender associations seems important as well. Callen's contributions to feminist and gender scholarship in art history are numerous, so this is less a critique and more a reflection on questions stimulated by her work.

A final thought is in regard to this publication's illustrations, which are plentiful and well-produced. However, at times the process of reading was almost hindered by this fact, which may seem an odd complaint for an art historian. So many works are discussed and nearly each one is illustrated. The book might have benefited from mild restraint in both the text and the reproductions. The arguments could have been strengthened by slowing down to discuss fewer works in depth (as the author does in the final chapter). Instead, greater use of detail images to better visualize artists' technique and paint application could aid the reader.

Callen's *The Work of Art* encourages scholars to consider an artist's process, both technical and physical. She contributes a thorough and informed examination of materials, and raises new questions regarding the correlation of style to labor and work. The publication is an intriguing example of the ways in which close technical study supports and expands arguments in nineteenth-century art history.

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