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book review of

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French Art in Nineteenth-Century Britain

Edward Morris

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French Art in Nineteenth-Century Britain is a survey of the reciprocal relations between the artistic communities of Britain and France, with an emphasis on the reception of French art in Britain. Edward Morris, for many years a curator at the Walker and Lady Lever Art Galleries on Merseyside, approaches this broad subject in twenty-three thematic chapters that assess the influence of French art on British artists through their training and their work. He also traces the movement of artists, critics, and patrons back and forth between the two countries. In Morris's view, the most significant development in the Anglo-French interchange is *genre historique*, or historical genre. This study, then, is not about the development of modernism, but rather the variations played on the academic tradition as channeled through France.

Morris's study emphasizes the dominance of French ideas over the arts in Britain. The heart of the matter is chapter III, "The Training of the Artist." Although British artists and critics frequently criticized French art as hard, mechanistic, and over-formal, it was generally agreed that French training was superior because of its focus on life drawing. From the eighteenth-century beginnings of the "British School," art schools in London tended to look toward the French for ideas. Yet often those ideas did not translate well to England. By the nineteenth century the Royal Academy was frequently criticized for its emphasis on meticulous surface drawing of plaster casts. The French practice of teaching ateliers had no significant parallel in England, where teaching was associated with the lowly drawing master. The French idea that fine arts, particularly life drawing, was central to the study of design, was introduced at the government Schools of Design (later the South Kensington Schools) but did not, in the end, hold sway. The Slade School at University College London, was founded on the French principle of "art studies from the life," but it developed rigidly conservative patterns under the leadership of Edward Poynter and Alphonse Legros.

Whether to study in Paris was an important issue for aspiring artists in nineteenth-century Britain. Many established artists, Benjamin Haydon and John Everett Millais among them, discouraged young artists from traveling abroad. Yet British art students went to Paris in

ever increasing numbers, especially after the mid-1860s when ateliers specializing in foreign students began to proliferate. The most popular were the Académie Julian, which was run along the same lines as the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and the atelier of Carolus-Duran, who taught a fashionable bravura style which, perhaps not coincidentally, suited the English proclivity for spontaneous brushwork and rich color. Wherever they studied, however, English students were confronted with French students who worked much harder than they did. This alone, Morris suggests, helped raise the professionalism of the British school.

The influential "*genre historique*," identified as a new category at the 1833 Salon, comprised paintings that treated events from post-Classical history, whether real or imagined, as genre-like anecdotes. Comparable to the historical novel, particularly as developed by Sir Walter Scott, it was easily absorbed into the English tradition by such artists as David Wilkie, William Mulready, and C. R. Leslie. Paul Delaroche is the major figure on the French side (and an artist who is a major presence in this study), but Morris also singles out Edouard Frère and Ernest Meissonier as artists who were particularly influential in England. Jean-Léon Gérôme and James Tissot were also important cross-over figures, although both were criticized for the French faults of "hardness" and "coldness."

Morris addresses nineteenth century revivals in several chapters. British Neoclassicism (like that of France) is seen to arise in eighteenth-century Rome, although English admiration for French Neoclassicism by and large turned to distaste as it became tainted with radical politics. Chapter XVIII, "Classicism, Idealism, and Symbolism," discusses the role of French ideas in the decoration of the new Palace of Westminster in the late 1830s and 1840s. Morris also stresses the influence of France on the Classical Revival of the 1860s. Frederic Leighton, Edward Poynter, Thomas Armstrong, and Edward Burne-Jones, among others, are examined for their commitment to the idea of pure aestheticism. Ary Scheffer and Paul Delaroche are seen to be the most important models for English artists, rather than Ingres, who was generally perceived to have the French faults of dryness and laboriousness. Chapter XVI, "Architecture and the Gothic Revival," discusses the French roots of its leader, A. W. Pugin. Morris also traces the influence of Early French Gothic on the architectural designs of G. E. Street and William Burges. Even the English country house was influenced by French style, as designers of opulent interiors often looked to French Rococo or the Neo-Renaissance style associated with Napoleon III.

Morris's survey of sculpture in nineteenth century England also stresses French influence. Carlo Marochetti and Henri Triqueti, both from France, had great success in England, although they were subject to "xenophobic opposition" from serious British artists and critics (p. 248). David d'Angers had many English pupils. Jules Dalou brought French ideas on naturalism and surface modeling to the Slade and the South Technical Art School in Lambeth. The "New Sculpture" of Frederic Leighton and Alfred Gilbert can be related to Dalou's approach. French sculpture probably had its greatest influence in Britain in the decorative arts, however: artist-craftsmen such as A.-É. Carrière-Belleuse significantly raised the level of design for manufacturers of porcelain, silver, and metalwork.

The exchange between Britain and France was not entirely one-sided, however. Chapter IV, "The Romantic Print and Watercolour," demonstrates that for a number of years British engravers were considered superior to the French, and mezzotint was considered an English

invention. The French did catch up: later in the century Ernest Gambart and other English print publisher-dealers tended to favor French engravers, but prints remain an area where the British at times ruled. So, too, watercolor was regarded by the French as an English specialty. Richard Parkes Bonington, the Fieldings (Thales, Theodore, and Newton), Thomas Shotter Boys, William Callow, and William Wyld appear throughout these pages as artists who worked in France and were prized by both French and English collectors. Chapter V, "Romanticism in France and Britain," emphasizes British sources. At the Salon of 1824, dubbed the "English Salon" due to the unusual number of English artists represented that year, the paintings of John Constable showed French painters that they must study nature, not models. French artists drew subjects from Byron, Scott, and Shakespeare. Delacroix, in particular, was devoted to Shakespeare, although England itself was uncongenial to him on his three-month visit in 1825. That year was the high point of the exchange of Romantic ideas; after that, development tended to proceed along national lines.

Morris devotes considerable attention to the venues in which this artwork was seen. In France, the best opportunities for viewing British art in the nineteenth century were the several international exhibitions. The most significant of these was the 1855 exhibition in Paris, which followed closely on the successful Anglo-French alliance in the Crimean War. It is a crucial moment in Anglo-French interchange: the first exhibition of British art in France and also the first chance for British visitors to see contemporary French art. On the whole, French critics were not impressed with the British School, in Morris's account (Gautier being a notable exception), and vice versa. The French, not surprisingly, dominated the occasion. Morris also briefly treats subsequent expositions in that exhibition-happy era, although none of these so clearly pitted the British against the French.

London, in contrast, offered numerous venues for viewing French art. The English had a taste for large-scale history painting (not a form their own government subsidized), and Jacques-Louis David, Théodore Gericault, Rosa Bonheur, and Gustave Doré had great successes in England with single-painting exhibitions. Chapter XII, "Exhibitions and Dealers in England," chronicles the rise of dealers as the "principal showroom and marketplace for works of art" (p. 130). Canny dealers such as Ernest Gambart and Paul Durand-Ruel disguised the commercial nature of their enterprises with titular "supervisory committees" of artists. A number of London dealers featured French art, among them the Dudley Gallery, the Grosvenor Gallery, and the Guildhall Art Gallery. On the other hand, London's official art world was less receptive to French art. Juries of Royal Academy exhibitions rarely admitted foreign entrants, betraying fear of foreign competition, and French artists who were admitted were often hung badly. The National Gallery acquired little contemporary French art until the twentieth century; the Tate Gallery, founded 1897, was also slow to acquire foreign works.

Morris also pays considerable attention to how French art was received in the British press. The nineteenth century was the "great age of the periodical," as Morris observes, with some 25,000 periodicals published in England alone (p. 206). Professional art criticism in England was stimulated by the founding of periodicals specializing in art, notably the *Art Journal*, *Fine Arts Quarterly Review*, and *Magazine of Art*. General publications such as the *Saturday Review*, *Spectator*, and *Academy* began to include more serious art criticism. (The *Athenaeum* led the way in this regard.) Morris surveys critics and their views, with some emphasis on

George Darley, P. G. Hamerton, W. E. Henley, and Lady Dilke. Not surprisingly, French critics paid less attention to British art than vice versa. Morris notes the views and the English connections of Philippe Burty, among others, and acknowledges the attention to British art in the *Gazette des beaux-arts*, aimed at collectors and connoisseurs, and *L'Art*, the London editor of which was J. Comyns Carr.

The Anglo-French connections of artists are explored in several thematic chapters. Chapter X, "Women," catalogues a number of significant English artists and writers on art with significant connections to French culture. Women played a major part in the liberal consensus between England and France, and figures such as Lady Morgan, Amelia Opie, and Helen Maria Williams found inspiration in the example of Mme de Stael, who visited England from 1813 to 1814. George Sand and Rosa Bonheur were role models for artists such as Elizabeth Butler, the only prominent battle painter of her day. Morris finds that in some ways Englishwomen who wished to study art had advantages over their French counterparts: women were admitted to the R. A. in 1860, but not to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts until 1900, and the Society of Female Artists was founded in 1857, whereas the analogous organization in Paris was founded only in 1881. Nevertheless, as Morris argues throughout, French training was considered superior, and women, usually forbidden to work from the nude model in London schools, flocked to the Academie Julian, the atelier of Colarossi, and other Paris ateliers for more liberal training. Paris also offered the inestimable advantage of the salon, and a number of Englishwomen (Henriette Browne and Mary Clarke Mohl are examples) hosted prominent salons there.

Chapter XIII, "Refugees and Economic Migrants," discusses artists who crossed the channel to live, either temporarily or permanently. Morris lists a number of artists who moved to France to live more cheaply, but his major topic is the many French artists who fled to England because of disruptions in patronage caused by the revolutions of 1789, 1830, and 1848. So many French artists emigrated to London in the early 1870s after the disastrous Franco-Prussian War and Commune that a French "ghetto" grew up in Soho.

In Chapter XIV, "The British Discovery of Northern France," Morris looks at artists in terms of where they worked. British artists were naturally drawn to Paris, which, even before the mid-century renovations, was much more grand than London. But more remote areas also attracted the English, especially Brittany, which offered convenient access to a "primitive ideal." Paul Gauguin is only a minor figure in this account of the many artists working in Pont-Aven. Stanhope Forbes, George Clausen, and others who later formed the Newlyn School are prominent examples of British artists who formed their styles in Brittany. A particularly valuable part of this chapter deals with less well-known artistic communities centering in French coastal towns. Calais was "the town of passage par excellence" and the center of artistic exchange between England and France (p. 169). Boulogne had some 3,000 English inhabitants, including a number of artists who found it a convenient refuge from London creditors. Dieppe had a "fantastical" character that attracted several coteries of artists.

Chapter XIX, "Barbizon, Rodin, and Scotland," is also organized around a particular site, the Fontainebleau Forest. Its best-known denizens, the Men of 1830, had many British patrons and artistic followers. (The Scottish seem to have been particularly enthusiastic collectors of

Barbizon paintings.) George du Maurier and the friends he memorialized in *Trilby* spent time there. And it was a particular haunt of Scottish artists, who tended to spend more time in France as students than Londoners. One important circle of writers—W. E. Henley, Sidney Colvin, and Edmond Gosse—gravitated around Robert Louis Stevenson and his brother R. A. M. Stevenson, an artist turned writer who became the English champion of Rodin.

Morris's study is particularly informative on the subject of patronage. Chapter VIII, "Whig Patronage and Radical Internationalism," surveys a number of liberal and radical collectors, who were, in general, quite sympathetic to French republicanism. Of particular importance are the Comte d'Orsay, who moved to London in 1830 and established an important salon, and the fourth Marquess of Hertford, who spent most of his life in Paris collecting the eighteenth-century works that would eventually become the Wallace Collection. Chapter IX, "Royal Patronage and Whig Attitudes," surveys the tastes and collecting patterns of both British and French monarchs. King George IV was a Francophile who remodeled Carlton House in French Neoclassical style and bought French furniture even during the Napoleonic wars. Queen Victoria patronized French artists, in particular Marochetti and Triqueti, and she had family ties to Louis-Philippe and Napoleon III, both of whom spent their years of exile in England and are portrayed in these pages as liberal patrons of the arts.

Chapter XV, "The English Circle of Ary Scheffer and Collectors in Manchester and Liverpool," demonstrates that the many wealthy manufacturers who collected art actually had more taste for French art than their London counterparts. The central figure in their collections was Ary Sheffer, who was admired as much for the "spiritual and emotional exaltation" of his ideas (p. 176) as his pietistic paintings. Art schools in Manchester and Liverpool also had an international approach: the Manchester School of Design, for instance, was founded on French principles of the centrality of fine arts in design education and belief in a universal language of art.

Morris concludes with a chapter titled "The Opposition to France," which catalogues negative comments on French art and its influence from the beginning of the nineteenth-century to its close. These criticisms were usually on moral or nationalistic grounds, and even progressive artists and writers such as Charles Ricketts and W. E. Henley are seen to have renounced their admiration for France. The enthusiastic interchange between France and England that arose after 1815 and reached its height at the 1855 Paris exposition had come to an end. Yet by concluding with this relentless catalogue of anti-French sentiment, Morris risks leaving the reader with the impression that the Anglo-French connection was tenuous, with the British, in particular, barely masking their chauvinism and puritanical disapproval.

The catalogue of a recent exhibition covering some of the same territory, *Crossing the Channel: British and French Painting in the Age of Romanticism*, had a more positive cast.^[1] Morris's study is neither as engagingly written nor as beautifully illustrated (its one hundred fifty-two illustrations are black and white), but it has different, and wider, aims. *French Art in Nineteenth-Century Britain* is encyclopedic in its approach: its strength is attention to the logistics of the interchange and to the numerous little-known artists, art critics, and collectors involved. It will be most useful to the well informed, however. Quite often Morris

writes about artists by last name only, so that references can be ambiguous (as in "Scott" or "Williams") or cryptic ("Marvy"). A good deal of knowledge about the historical and political context is assumed. Furthermore, the book is not as easy to use as it might be. The organization is not always clear: chapters have no internal divisions and the long paragraphs often change topics two or three times. There is no bibliography. The endnotes can be difficult to use, as Morris uses the old-fashioned "*op. cit.*" for second references and the reader may have to search through long columns of notes for a title.

For the serious student of nineteenth-century European art, however, Morris has performed the valuable task of bringing together information from a wide range of sources on artists, their work, its critical reception, and its ultimate fate in the hands of collectors and public institutions. It is a worthy addition to nineteenth-century studies.

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Notes

[1] Patrick Noon, *Crossing the Channel: British and French Painting in the Age of Romanticism*. With contributions by Stephen Bann, David Blayney Brown, Rachel Meredith, Christine Riding and Marie Watteau (London: Tate Publishing, 2003).