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William Hauptman

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"Louise Breslau: De l'impressionnisme aux années folles"

Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne, Switzerland, 13 October 2001-20 January 2002

Catherine Lepdor, Anne-Catherine Krüger, and Gabriel P. Weisberg, eds., *Louise Breslau: De l'impressionnisme aux années folles*

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When Louise Breslau trained at the Académie Julian in Paris, the founder of that celebrated atelier is rumored to have been so impressed by her talent that he predicted her work would be widely known. This was indeed the case during her most active years in Paris and Switzerland, and, like Rosa Bonheur and Mary Cassatt, she seemed destined to typify the successful *femme peintre*. After her death in 1927, however, her name fell into oblivion, and today few historians of the nineteenth century would count her among the elevated ranks of later artists of the period or even claim to know more than one of her works. The last major exhibition of her substantial corpus of paintings, drawings, and pastels was a commemorative one mounted in 1928 at the École des Beaux-Arts, a curious site given that it had barred women from study until 1897^[1], hence forcing her instruction in Julian's private studio.^[2] This neglect of Breslau's art is reflected in its scant mention in much of the feminist literature^[3] or even in the annals of Swiss art, which claims her as one of its own. When in 1988 the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia, exhibited 65 paintings illustrating the direction of Swiss art from 1730 to 1930, it included works by relatively unknown figures outside native borders-Johann Ulrich, Adam Töpffer, and François Bocion, among others-but failed to exhibit a single work by Breslau, even though diverse examples of her major works were prominently available in public Swiss collections.^[4] Similarly, when the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne, which possesses at least two of Breslau's most accomplished canvases, published a selection of its most important masterpieces the following year, it did not include any of her works, nor was her name mentioned in the inventory of their nineteenth-century holdings.^[5]

When Louise Breslau trained at the Académie Julian in Paris, the founder of that celebrated atelier is rumored to have been so impressed by her talent that he predicted her work would be widely known. This was indeed the case during her most active years in Paris and Switzerland, and, like Rosa Bonheur and Mary Cassatt, she seemed destined to typify the successful *femme peintre*. After her death in 1927, however, her name fell into oblivion, and today few historians of the nineteenth century would count her among the elevated ranks of later artists of the period or even claim to know more than one of her works. The last major exhibition of her substantial corpus of paintings, drawings, and pastels was a commemorative one mounted in 1928 at the École des Beaux-Arts, a curious site given that it had barred women from study until 1897^[1], hence forcing her instruction in Julian's private studio.^[2] This neglect of Breslau's art is reflected in its scant mention in much of the feminist literature^[3] or even in the annals of Swiss art, which claims her as one of its own. When in 1988 the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia, exhibited 65 paintings illustrating the direction of Swiss art from 1730 to 1930, it included works by relatively unknown figures outside native borders-Johann Ulrich, Adam Töpffer, and François Bocion, among others-but failed to exhibit a single work by Breslau, even though diverse examples

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Except for the periodic publication of several of her works in histories of the Académie Julian or in journals of friends,[6] Breslau's art—which includes almost 800 works—has remained hidden from view, just as her accomplishments have rested as minor footnotes in histories of the era. Although she was born in Munich, her family moved to Zurich when she was two years old and she remained there until 1876, when she was sent to Paris to pursue her artistic formation. She began to exhibit four years later and reached her stride with her first irrefutable success—*Les amies*, a striking triple portrait with lingering Realist and Symbolist tendencies—in the Salon of 1881. So successful was this melancholy painting that it was exhibited subsequently in Brussels, London, and Geneva, and was the first picture by Breslau to be purchased by a public institution. Her work continued to receive acclaim throughout the 1880s and she encountered dozens of celebrated colleagues—Degas in 1882, Breton in 1886, and Boldini in 1887, among them. More distinctions accrued, culminating with a *médaille d'or* in 1889 and the *chevalier de la Légion d'honneur* in 1901—she was the first foreign woman to be so distinguished in France.

Even a brief outline of Breslau's remarkable career justifies an exploration into the nature of that acclaim. This exhibition, devoted solely to her works, indeed serves as an able introduction, as it offers a bold attempt at a rehabilitation. Bringing together a substantial number of her works from museums in France, Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland, and dozens of private collections—no easy feat—the exhibition shows more than a hundred paintings, pastels, and drawings, thus qualifying as the most extensive presentation of Breslau's artistry since the 1928 Paris show. It is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue (in French only) with essays by three notable scholars who investigate aspects of the artist's career, painterly production, and her role in later nineteenth-century art. The publication also contains a very substantial chronology and a full bibliography of 186 items. Many of these provide references to earlier critical commentary, to habitual biographical dictionaries (but not, curiously, to John O'Grady's accessible entry in the Grove), exhibition catalogues, and a few general works on female painters, some of which, however, make no mention of Breslau directly.[7] There is no available monograph on Breslau, with the exception of Anne-Catherine Krüger's long doctoral dissertation, presented in 1988, which is accessible to scholars only with difficulty.[8] Therefore, this catalogue is predetermined, by its amplitude, critical analysis, illustrations, and timing, to become one of the authoritative sources on this artist.

The introduction by Catherine Lepdor, a curator at the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts and the organizer of the exhibition, is an ardent portrait of Breslau, her artistic and personal tribulations, and, most notably, her relationship to the very complex picture of Swiss and French art between the Franco-Prussian War and the First World War. The essay is carefully weighed, persuasive, and teeming with information, including pertinent references to such influences as Fantin-Latour, Cassatt, Degas, and many others. Lepdor's discussion of several of the pictures, particularly the fabulous *Contre-jour* and *Chez soi*, displays astute

comprehension of these absorbing compositions, made all the more delectable by a florid literary style that works well with the subject of her essay.

The two essays by Krüger are of substantial interest as well. The first, more biographical in tone, brings Breslau's life and circle into sharp focus. Though perhaps less passionate than Lepdor's, it is more clinical in outlining the primary aspects of Breslau's career, which it presents with studious detail (as the 287 footnotes attest, making one doubt that any important stone was left unturned). For the reader who desires to know more about Breslau's career than what appears in standard literature, this essay is an essential source. The same can be said of Krüger's second essay, which analyzes the paintings themselves. Compelling, incisive, and full of insight, it adds greatly to our understanding of the context and workings of Breslau's art, and should be consulted by art historians interested in the period. There is little doubt that Krüger has a profound appreciation of Breslau's paintings and is ably gifted in transmitting that to the reader.

Sandwiched between Krüger's essays is one by Gabriel Weisberg on the reception of Breslau, Bonheur, and Amélie Beaury-Saurel (one of the lesser-known figures of the Julian group; she married Rodolphe Julian and ran the Academy after his death in 1907). Weisberg effectively traces the importance of the three, particularly the aura Bonheur maintained as the *éminence grise* of nineteenth-century female painters. More important is the manner in which Weisberg discusses the relationship between Breslau and Beaury-Saurel, who knew each other from the 1870s on. Both had many points of similarity, and, as Weisberg fittingly points out, both worked in a manner that was personal and dynamic-sometimes concentrating on individual expression, sometimes insisting, in their iconographic choices, on making political statements about equality of the sexes. But the sensitivity of each approach is equally striking, with the shadow of Bonheur looming large as the *mère sainte*, a fixed point by which much was judged. It makes fine reading and shows depth that is not always present in catalogue essays.

An exhibition that attempts to restore, or at least revalue, the work of an artist is a hazardous undertaking for various reasons. There is an inherent risk in exposing the corpus of works to critical judgment, since by its very neglect it may be deemed as little more than the workings of a minor figure among major ones. The question that must be asked, then, is whether Breslau merits the status of an important painter whose work, now rediscovered, has a bearing on our understanding of late-nineteenth-century tendencies. That there are examples of superior talent in her work is hardly to be disputed, although some were already discussed in the New York exhibition of the Académie Julian. The two male portraits depicted in the studio-the poet Henry Davison of 1880, which won the approval of Degas, and *Le sculpteur Jean Carriès* of 1886-87 (the two met through the intermediary of Jules Breton and subsequently had a brief affair)-clearly show a painterly prowess that lesser painters, male or female, could but envy. This is also true of the provocative triple portrait, *Les amies* of 1881, depicting her closest friends Maria Feller, at left, and Sophie Schaeppi, a Swiss painter, at center, with the artist, at right, closely observing the two. With its daring forms, brilliant brushwork, and white Manet-like dog sitting atop the scarlet tablecloth, the painting evokes mood and inner reflection as few other works of the 1880s do. The painting *Chez soi* of 1885 is a complex psychological portrayal of Breslau's sister and mother in an interior setting, not unlike some of the earlier genre paintings of Ferdinand Hodler, that

projects as much subconscious ambiguity and ethereal silence as do some of Degas's interiors of about the same period. The example of the large portrait of Madeleine Cartwright of 1887, which nestles somewhere between Sargent and Whistler, shows that Breslau was able to embroider influences yet still retain her artistic self. The most distinguished interior portrait is probably her *Contre-jour* of 1888, which displays her poetic subtlety and is a remarkable play on forms, light, color, and emotional presence. Concerning outdoor portraits, her painting of a friend from her Paris years, *Julie Feurgard-Sous les pommiers*, executed in situ at Sannois, is an adroit reminder that Impressionist lessons-as the subtitle of the exhibition implies-were not lost in her art; like Fantin or Degas in the 1880s, they are adapted rather than flaunted.

These works alone-and there are others, including marvelous examples of her pastels-attest to a very distinguished painter whose works should be known and integrated by historians of the epoch. Among the hundred works in the exhibition, however, there are inevitably pictures that do not rise above the ordinary. Few of the still lifes, while capable specimens of flower painting, provide the impressive sensations that are present in other artists' paintings in the genre at about the same time-the works of Manet, for example, who impregnated the genre with remarkable sentiment and emotion.[9] Some of these of the later period in her career appear particularly weak and argue little for Breslau's renown or reevaluation. Some of the portraits, as well, seem to show a decline in creative drive, as though other ideas took over from the original power: her *Gamines* of 1893, *Jeune fille pelant un fruit* of 1903, and the *Famille Baumann* of 1921, which in the catalogue are said to demonstrate a liberation of color, appear instead to be an unmanageable element, an attempt at modernity that somewhere goes astray.

Despite the weakness of some of the paintings, there is no doubt that the strength of the show and the catalogue is in providing a fascinating exploration of an artist whose early work, in particular, merits attention and respect. The findings in this retrospective are important and add to the literature of female painters, a literature that is growing steadily in scope. Most important, this exhibition reveals that beyond Bonheur and Cassatt there are indeed overlooked figures who are worthy of attention and study.

William Hauptman
Independent Scholar
Lausanne, Switzerland

Notes

[1] See Tamar Garb, *Sisters of the Brush: Women's Artistic Culture in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 70f.

[2] Her instruction at the Académie Julian is discussed in Gabriel P. Weisberg and Jane R. Becker, eds., *Overcoming All Obstacles: The Women of the Académie Julian* (exh. cat., New York: Dahesh Museum, 1999).

[3] For an overview, see Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, rev. ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), p. 366, which has a resourceful bibliography of the most important literature.

[4] *From Liotard to Le Corbusier: 200 Years of Swiss Painting, 1730-1930* (exh. cat., Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 1988).

[5] Erika Billeter, ed., *Chefs-d'œuvre du Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts Lausanne* (Lausanne: Le Musée; Berne: Bentelli Verlag, 1989).

[6] Particularly those of Madeleine Zillhardt, *Louise Catherie Breslau et ses amis* (Paris: Éditions des Portiques, 1932), and Marie Bashkirtseff, *Journal de Maria Bashkirtseff*, first published in 1887. Many editions of *Journal de Maria Bashkirtseff* are known and various English translations have been published since 1889. Two of the most recent are Mathilde Blind, trans., *The Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff* (London: Virago Press, 1985), and Phyllis Howard Kenberger with Katherine Kenberger, trans., *I Am the Most Interesting Book of All: The Diary of Marie Bashkirtseff* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997). [N.B.: When I wanted to examine the journals in the Swiss libraries, I was able to find her publications only when I checked under her Russian name, Marija Konstantinovna Baskirceva. This might be true in other European libraries as well.]

[7] As, for example, Garb, *Sisters of the Brush*, which has no listing for Breslau in the index.

[8] Anne-Catherine Krüger, "Die Malerin Louise Catherie Breslau (1856-1927): Biographie und Werkanalyse. Beschreibender Oeuvrekatalog des Gesamtwerkes," 4 vols. (Ph.D. diss., Universität Hamburg, 1988).

[9] See George L. Mauner, *Manet: The Still-Life Paintings* (New York: H. N. Abrams in association with the American Federation of Arts, 2000 [exhibited Musée d'Orsay, Paris, and Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore]).