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book review of

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Siulolovao Challons-Lipton

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Siulolovao Challons-Lipton

The Scandinavian Pupils of the Atelier Bonnat, 1867-1894

Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001

200 pp.; 29 b/w ills., 21 color ills.; \$89.95

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As one of the best-known and most prolific academic portrait painters working in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century, Léon Bonnat (1833–1922) commanded a large following of students eager to absorb his ideas and painting techniques. Bonnat had established himself as an artist in the 1860s, when his painting style clearly began to show the influence of Spanish and French creativity from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries while remaining open to the significance of photography. Bonnat was also known for his efforts in helping many of his students establish official careers. Aside from a few contemporary nineteenth-century studies and a literature that essentially ceased considering Bonnat as a creative or political force by about 1930, however, there has been little continuing consideration of Bonnat either as an effective teacher or as a seminal painter. Almost nothing has been published in English that examines Bonnat's paintings and the atelier practices that induced several generations of Scandinavian artists to go to Paris to study with this master.^[1] Indeed, until recently academic painters have not generally been the focus of serious art historical study. Training obtained in their ateliers, most of which existed outside of the official studios of the *École des Beaux-Arts*, has not been systematically investigated, and works produced in a teacher-student relationship have seldom surfaced. Few scholars have even been able to find enough information to enable a reconstruction of the painting methods of a given master. An attempt to remedy this dearth of information is found in Challons-Lipton's recent book on Bonnat's studio and the role he played in the education of so many Scandinavian painters.

Even though his studio was not the only one to attract young students to Paris (the *Académie Julian* took on far more) Bonnat's easygoing demeanor made him popular with students. Moreover, he was known for advocating "modern" teaching methods; he encouraged an appreciation for the old masters and for contemporary realists, but was quick to promote the integration of new ideas and techniques.

Bonnat destroyed all the letters he received, so it is difficult to reconstruct not only his thoughts but his contacts as well. It is only by locating information about those of Bonnat's students who had effective careers after leaving his atelier that his importance as a teacher can be judged at all. Hence, his relationship with students from Scandinavia, a significant component of those he taught, provides a rare opportunity to assess his ability to inspire the young.

In chapters one and two, Challons-Lipton, after establishing the case for Léon Bonnat's creativity, examines the artist's instruction and the reasons for his selection as a patron for young Scandinavian artists, and chapter three systematically chronicles the Scandinavian artists who attended Bonnat's atelier. Chapter four deals with the qualities of Bonnat's realism, making the case for his appreciation of life study and his understanding of the old masters, and it examines the ties both with contemporary realists and the photographic

revolution that swept through the avant-garde and academic communities at that time. Closing chapters ponder Bonnat's influence on Scandinavian artistic pedagogy and link him, somewhat less effectively, with Scandinavian Impressionism.

Students who selected Bonnat as their patron have been identified, but it is difficult to judge the quality of the works produced under his tutelage because so few have been located. Perhaps few have survived, but the range of artists who studied with Bonnat would suggest otherwise, and this study would benefit from the discovery of such additional works. Without such examples, the reader is left with a compilation of works by various artists who worked with Bonnat, an understanding of what was accomplished under his guidance based primarily on presumption, and an examination of later work wherein the influence of Bonnat is visually apparent—or not. This is a rather tangential and inadequate way to demonstrate that the impact of a "master" has taken root at a given time in a particular artist's career. If these works no longer exist, however, one cannot fault the author for not finding them and looking at later, more mature works might be the only way to gauge Bonnat's influence.

In an appendix the author examines Bonnat's various studios and enumerates the names of some of Scandinavia's leading painters found in the registers. At the Atelier Bonnat, for example, were Gustaf Cederstrom, Laurits Tuxen, Peder Kroyer, and Christian Skredsvig. Each of these painters evolved into a major naturalist, and the training under Bonnat was clearly supportive, incisive, and complementary to their own native predilections. At Bonnat's atelier on rue Ampere (a studio he shared with Alfred Roll and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes) other painters were dominant including Prince Eugen and the Norwegians Erik Werenskiold and Edvard Munch. A similar atelier for women (among the few that were active in Paris) also led Helene Schjerfbeck, Mina Carlson-Bredberg, and Harriet Backer to train with Bonnat. In each of these ateliers the student's own sense of independence was nurtured as emergent personalities and careers were openly encouraged. This was very significant since it took place at a time when thousands of art students were descending on Paris to find a patron who could be both a guide and a stimulant for a career in painting.

There can be little doubt that Challons-Lipton's volume is well intentioned in its determination to demonstrate that Léon Bonnat was a seminal force on Scandinavian artists and that his teaching methods were crucial to art training in the north. Although these issues are well stated, the evidence necessary to demonstrate the ways in which Bonnat's imagery or methods were assimilated remains unclear and imprecise. The book seems less a definitive statement than a précis for a further examination that ostensibly would locate and mine extant documentation and works of art. Perhaps the publication of this book will bring to light new archival evidence that will provide the comprehensive information needed to shore up the compelling theories offered by the author.

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[1] For contemporary reference, see Alisa Luxenberg, "Leon Bonnat (1833–1922)," Ph.D. dissertation, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1991.