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book review of

Pierre Puvis de Chavannes by Aimee Brown Price

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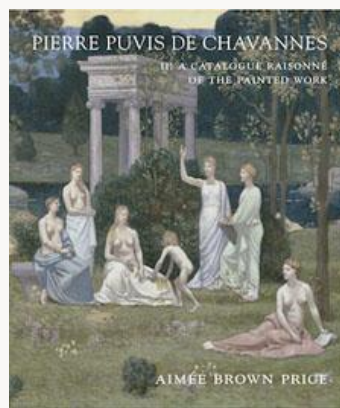
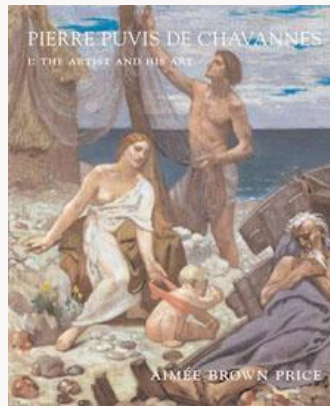
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Aimée Brown Price,
Pierre Puvis de Chavannes.
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Even during his lifetime, the career of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–1898) was recognized as occupying a unique position. Although he had only the briefest encounter with formal academic training at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and never took a seat in the Académie des Beaux-Arts, he was among the most prolific of the government-supported painters of the Second Empire and the Third Republic, winning prominent commissions across France and obtaining in the last decade of his life one of the first, and most prestigious, mural commissions in the United States, for the grand staircase of the Boston Public Library. Yet he was admired, and even emulated, by scores of artists of younger generations whose aesthetic agendas ranged from the staunchest conservatism to the most radical avant-gardism. He is thus a player in virtually any narrative of the art of the past century and a half, yet almost always in a supporting role. He is a 'follower' of Eugène Delacroix and Thomas Couture, an 'admirer' of Théodore Chassériau, and an 'inspiration' to Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso.

Although he has been the subject of monographs since at least 1896, his posthumous exhibition history typically places him within a broader context: *Puvis de Chavannes and The Modern Tradition*, organized by Richard J. Wattenmaker and held at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1975, is paradigmatic. Here, Puvis' work was displayed along with a substantial number of works of his near-contemporaries: Gustave Moreau, Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Maurice Denis, and pivotal works by Matisse and Picasso. Much the same approach appeared in the 1994 exhibition held at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam; the 2002 exhibition at the Palazzo Grassi, Venice, which proposed an alternate genealogy of modernism within which Puvis displaces Edouard Manet as the grandfather of abstract art; and lastly, the 2005 exhibition at the Musée de Picardie, Amiens, concluded with works by Matisse, Picasso and even, a bit oddly, Fernand Léger.

With the arrival of Aimée Brown Price's two-volume *Pierre Puvis de Chavannes* the spotlight at last focuses brightly on the Lyons-born painter alone. Published by Yale University Press in 2010, Price's study comprises a *l'homme et l'oeuvre* biography and a catalogue raisonné of the paintings running to some 500 numbers, including destroyed works, missing paintings, and identified forgeries, copies and other pictures in need of additional study. The book is a splendid production, amply supplied with plates in both color and black and white, featuring particularly fine new photography of the architecturally-installed murals, which earned him his greatest renown. Never have students of art and history had the opportunity to so fully explore the complexities of this most singular of painters. Without a doubt the book will remain a landmark in the essential scholarship of the period.

Puvis was born in 1824; his life spanned three-quarters of the nineteenth century. He was the last credible practitioner of the art of the mural that began at the time of Giotto, and his work derives part of its authority from its 'Twilight-of-the-Idols' position. After all, the dream of a great public art remains perennial, but even the most fervent revolutionaries among us must admit that the extraordinary frescoes of Diego Rivera, José Orozco and David Alfaro Siquieros look quirky and topical when contrasted with Puvis' spare and elegiac corpus. Like myth itself, Puvis' murals invite perennial rereading, unlike historically specific work.

Puvis' family was rooted in the industrial grand bourgeoisie, but as Price notes, by 1859 Pierre Puvis was eager to reinstate the aristocratic "de Chavannes" that had been expediently jettisoned in the revolutionary era, henceforth styling himself a scion of the Burgundian aristocracy, among the most ancient and revered in Europe (I, 7). During the Second Empire, with its mania for titles both old and ersatz, the redubbing may have been in the interest of career points, but through the long years of Puvis' career, what it publicly emphasized was his detachment from the task of earning a living. Like Manet, Paul Cézanne, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and many other painters of the later nineteenth century, Puvis' economic survival was guaranteed by family wealth, and he was free of the demand to conform to obvious pressures of patronage.

As Price makes clear, Puvis made abundant use of this freedom in the pursuit of his education as a painter. He was as self-styled as Gustave Courbet or any Romantic might have wished: he spent six fruitless months in the studio of Henry Scheffer before embarking on an extended study trip to Italy. Upon his return, he had brief connections with the studios of Delacroix and Couture, and like a number of younger artists, found inspiration in Théodore Chassériau. Yet

he made no effort, as most of his professionally-minded peers would have done, to prepare for the *concours des places* that would have facilitated his access to the lucrative competitions and scholarships available through the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, although he did take an anatomy course there, apparently as an *élève libre*, or unenrolled student (I, 16). Travel and self-study were Puvis's chosen masters, and he quite rapidly passed through a period of dependence on the examples of Delacroix and Chassériau to forge his own first style in the mid-1850s.

From almost the very beginning, Puvis set his sights on grand public painting, eschewing the private comforts of the easel picture. He cut his teeth as a painter of decorative murals in projects for his brother's home, Le Brouchy, an estate north of Lyons. His first project was more of a lark: a series of frescoes on one of the out buildings of the estate, executed, according to Price, with the collaboration of his friend Alfred Bellet du Poisat (I, 26). These survive in semi-ruined condition, and seem almost caricatures of donkeys, oxen and peasant children. A second project was more substantial: five large murals in oil framed into the wood-paneled walls of the dining room of the main house. These were produced between 1854 and 1855.

Here Puvis combined a traditional decorative scheme of the seasons with biblical stories that relate to food: the miraculous catch of fish for spring, Ruth and Boaz at the harvest for summer, the drunkenness of Noah with the pressing of wine for autumn, and a return from the hunt with the story of Jacob and Esau. The return of the prodigal son provides the theme for a fifth mural. Four overdoors complete the cycle, more abstractly themed 'war,' 'peace,' 'the arts,' and 'the sciences.'

As Le Brouchy remains a private residence, and the canvases are installed in such a fashion as to prohibit their exhibition elsewhere, the murals have remained outside of the familiar canon of Puvis' work, although black-and-white photographs of four of the larger works were published in Brian Petrie's 1997 monograph on the artist.^[1] In Price's large color reproductions of the paintings, a hesitant, more coloristic foretaste of Puvis' mature style is visible. The Italian High Renaissance was Puvis' principal point of reference, particularly the works of Paolo Veronese, Raphael, and Sodoma. The principal panels are slightly over eight feet tall and range from between seven and a half to over ten feet wide, and feature numerous figures, many at life size. The outlay for models, canvas and paints would have been considerable, and numerous studies, both in chalk and oil, preceded their execution. (Price reproduces one drawing for the cycle, cat. 57a, which once bore an attribution to Jean-François Millet, underscoring Puvis' nonacademic graphic style, [II, 41].) Yet notwithstanding Puvis' isolation from academic circles and his unconventional drawing, the style of the murals is not all that distant from what one would expect from a young protégé of François-Edouard Picot or Charles Gleyre. The process of paring away the complex spatial enmeshing of compositional elements, and the fading away of saturated local color, began in Puvis' next pair of large-scale compositions.

Puvis' public career was launched with an audacious pair of mural-like paintings executed without a patron and shown at the Salon of 1861. *Concordia* and *Bellum*, each slightly over eleven by eighteen feet, were shown with the wishful designation "*peinture murale*." This was a huge undertaking. For comparison, Courbet's *Studio of the Painter*, painted for the 1855 Exposition Universelle measured 11' 10" by 19' 7" and declined due to its scale, was the

centerpiece of his self-mounted exhibition; Courbet, moreover, had the financial support of banking heir and collector Alfred Bruyas.

Although Courbet's picture is subtitled "an allegory," it was never meant to be anything more than an easel painting. Its meanings are emphatically private, and the picture is something of a painted manifesto. It remains one of the most problematic of Courbet's career; Courbet's independent pavilion was at best a pyrrhic victory in practical, that is to say, economic, terms. Price makes clear, however, that Puvis' ploy did not pass unnoticed. Even without the prodding tag line "*peinture murale*," his public intent was obvious. It did not take too long for things to fall into place.

Price unravels the oblique manner in which the brobdingnagian paintings became Puvis' first public *décor*. Key in the transaction was Arthur-Stanislas Diet, architect of the new Musée Napoléon (now Musée de Picardie) in Amiens. The Ministry of Fine Arts had purchased *Concordia*; Puvis donated *Bellum* so that the pair could remain together. In 1863, Puvis repeated the act, exhibiting *Le Repos* and *Le Travail* at the Salon; the pictures "fortuitously" were an exact fit for spaces remaining in the grand staircase of the museum. When the state declined to purchase them, awkward negotiations with *surintendant des Beaux-arts* Comte de Niewerkerke ensued; eventually the second set of pictures made their way to Amiens. Puvis was commissioned to produce ancillary canvases to serve as overdoors and to otherwise complete the *décor*. He was subsequently commissioned to produce a work expressly for the museum, *Ave Picardia Nutrix*, in 1864. Finally, in 1878 Puvis was approached yet again to produce a final decoration, his *Ludus Pro Patria*, a 57-foot-long mate to his 1864 composition.

As a result of its long and multiphased relationship with Puvis, the Musée de Picardie is a crucial stop for those wishing to investigate the development of Puvis' distinctive style. Indeed, Amiens is one of the five cities in France with a "Rue Puvis de Chavannes," and even boasts an "Hôtel Puvis de Chavannes" into the bargain, conveniently located adjacent to the museum. The Amiens projects cemented Puvis' career as a public and monumental painter. Decade by decade, commissions for similar projects rolled in: The Musée des Beaux-Arts de Marseille (1867); Hôtel de Ville, Poitiers (1870); the Church of Sainte-Geneviève, Paris (1874 and 1893); the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon (1883); the *grand amphithéâtre* of the Sorbonne, Paris (1886); the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen (1888); Hôtel de Ville, Paris (1889 and 1892); and finally, in 1893, the Boston Public Library, designed by Paris-trained architects McKim, Mead, and White. Many of Puvis' mural projects were exhibited in Paris prior to their installation in the buildings they were produced for. This allowed for Puvis to maintain a powerful presence in the artistic life of the capital, even if the work was eventually consigned to buildings outside the capital. Yet for latter-day viewers, a remarkable amount of diligent travel is required to familiarize oneself with the works *in situ*.

Paradoxically, Puvis' most noted Paris murals — the Sorbonne and the Hôtel de Ville — are somewhat tricky to access, requiring guided tours that must be scheduled in advance and which are, even then, subject to the whims of room usage in busy urban buildings. The excellent photography in Price's book makes the imagery more available than ever, and it is to be hoped that more historians will make the requisite pilgrimages to study the pictures in person. With the exception of Poitiers, Puvis' provincial murals adorn some of the most prominent art museums in France outside of Paris.

Because of the geographical fixity of the murals, Puvis' easel paintings have played a disproportionately large role in the reception of the painter's work after his death. Certainly they are the backbone of the exhibitions devoted to his work over the past three and a half decades; the easily portable studies for the monumental pictures, and the reduced-scale replicas Puvis commonly made of them are no substitute for the magnitude of the primary works. According to Marius Vachon, his first biographer, Puvis considered his independent pictures mere "entr'actes."^[2] Nevertheless, these were the images that exerted the most powerful influence on Puvis' contemporaries and successors, perhaps in part because the easel picture, not the mural, became the virtually unique focus of painterly practice after the Second Empire. Price devotes considerable attention to such pictures as *Hope* (1872; cat. 189), *Young Women by the Sea* (1879; cat. 255), *The Poor Fisherman* (1881; cat. 272) and *The Dream* (1883; cat. 297).

As Price makes clear, in these works, more than the tremendous decorations that were his public face, we are able to see Puvis' symbolist soul. This is a highly contested territory, as Price argued in her essay on Puvis' critical reception for the 2002 Palazzo Grassi exhibition catalogue.^[3] As much as Puvis claimed independence from dictated subject matter in his public murals, the easel pictures allowed him to break free from the burden of his public voice.^[4] The easel pictures are almost uniformly indecipherable; there is a fundamental refusal to succumb to narrative closure, with the possible exception of the pure allegory of *Hope*. This is Puvis at his most modernist, and perhaps this is why Puvis' modernist followers (Gauguin in Tahiti; Matisse; Picasso in his blue and rose periods) found them the most compelling. The public works stimulated more conventionally narrative images, as can be seen in Alphonse Osbert and Emile-René Ménard's abundant revisitations of Puvis' themes. The cleavage between Puvis' monumental *décors* and his private easel paintings lies behind the wide range of response to his *oeuvre*: given the open-ended nature of the easel pictures, virtually everyone could feel authorized to locate his or her private fantasy realm within the implicitly more public narrative of the murals. What could be better than to have one's own dreams on display in City Hall?

The role of Puvis' work as a political and social coagulant to discourse on the public sphere in late nineteenth-century France has provided the theme for two of the most recent works touching on Puvis, both published in 2002: Jennifer L. Shaw's monograph *Dream States: Puvis de Chavannes, Modernism, and the Fantasy of France* and Margaret Werth's *The Joy of Life: The Idyllic in French Art circa 1900*.^[5] Neither study attempts the breadth of Price's monograph, and both focus on Puvis' later production, and in particular, on the fraught decade of the 1890s in France. Both authors acknowledge their indebtedness to Price's scholarship and assistance, of which only a small fraction was available at the time. In contrast to the psycho-political history of Puvis' reception (both Shaw and Werth began their projects as Ph.D. dissertations for the same advisor, art historian T. J. Clark), Price allows the line of Puvis's life and work to speak for itself.

In the first volume of her study, Price structures Puvis' career into five chapters, headed by the decades of his fifty-year career. She prefaces these with an introductory chapter and a second chapter devoted to Puvis' background and education. There is a fortunate rhyming between the dates of Puvis' major mural compositions and the beginnings (or ends) of decades, and the great rupture of the Franco-Prussian War splits the first four chapters from the concluding

three. Price thus makes it possible to discern the peak of Puvis' career as largely a phenomenon of the Third Republic, an era within which capitalism and democracy attempted to advance simultaneously through the French body politic. In the end, neither was to win.

Chapters within the first volume are divided by subheadings that weave a complex narrative of Puvis, his life, his times, and his works. Price indicates the broad outlines of political and cultural history and offers a wealth of information about the smaller details of Puvis' career and his myriad connections within the artistic community of Third Republic France. The period sees a gradual collapse of the centralized arts bureaucracy established under the absolute monarchies, and the supplanting of the once-almighty Salon by a network of private brokerages that soon became international trading concerns. The Durand-Ruel Gallery, which held a retrospective exhibition of Puvis' work in 1887, was a leading example. When, in 1889, the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts split off from the Société des Artistes Français, one of the last vestiges of the hegemony of the Académie des Beaux-Arts was dissolved. Puvis was one of the leaders of the departing faction, later serving as President of the new organization.

Price awards Puvis' affective life a measure of attention, notably his life-long liaison with the Princesse Marie Cantacuzène, who had been linked with Théodore Chassériau until the latter's death in 1856. The pair were finally married in 1897; both died the following year. Price, however, discloses further dimensions of Puvis' *vie intime*. Through a meticulous examination of letters, dedicated drawings, caricatures and Puvis' works themselves (an atypically intimate still life of house slippers (cat. 98), offered as a gift to Cantacuzène), Price charts a failed courtship between Puvis and Berthe Morisot, who eventually married, in 1874, Manet's younger brother Eugène. The Paris of the 1860s and 70s was indeed a small world.

Price's account of Puvis' life and work is enriched by decades of archival research, and she has obviously earned the trust of the many owners of private archives, enabling her to provide an astonishing wealth of information, not merely about the artist himself, but also about the world which he inhabited. In the second volume of her study, the catalogue raisonné itself, Price masters a truly mind-boggling amount of data, not merely assembling Puvis' extensive painted corpus and a large share of related drawings, but also adding a fascinating array of collateral material, including caricatures from the popular press, copies of Puvis' work by other artists, and historical comparative materials. Entries include a full material description of each work, as well as exhaustive information on provenance, exhibition history, art historical literature, and a listing of related works.

Price's discussion of each catalogued work is remarkably thorough, and many of the entries have the scholarly gravity of independent articles or book chapters. Few nineteenth-century painters in France, or any nation, have had the benefit of the zeal and fortitude of Price's scholarship, and precious few indeed outside the canon of modernist icons have catalogues raisonnés at all. Price's book reaffirms the importance of primary research, even in an era where positive scholarship has lost much of its prestige in the academy. Her task was great, and her accomplishment is extraordinary. Because of Puvis' exceptional position in the development of nineteenth- and twentieth-century painting, the impact of this work will be great.

Philip Walsh

Notes

- [1] Brian Petrie, *Puvis de Chavannes* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1997), 22-26.
- [2] Marius Vachon, *Puvis de Chavannes: Un Maître de ce temps* (Paris: Société d'Édition Artistique, n.d. [1896]), 156.
- [3] "Puvis de Chavannes's Critical Fortune," in Serge Lemoine, ed., *Towards Modern Art: From Puvis de Chavannes to Matisse and Picasso* (New York: Rizzoli, 2002), 61-69.
- [4] See Vachon, 70-72, on Puvis' failed commission for the Bordeaux Bourse.
- [5] Jennifer L. Shaw, *Dream States: Puvis de Chavannes, Modernism, and the Fantasy of France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Margaret Werth, *The Joy of Life: The Idyllic in French Art circa 1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).