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book review of

Correspondance entre Henri Fantin-Latour et Otto Scholderer (1858–1902) edited by Mathilde Arnoux, Thomas W. Gaehtgens, and Anne Tempelaere-Panzani

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Mathilde Arnoux, Thomas W. Gaehtgens, and Anne Tempelaere-Panzani, eds.,
Correspondance entre Henri Fantin-Latour et Otto Scholderer (1858–1902).
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Since its foundation fifteen years ago, the Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte or Centre Allemand d'Histoire de l'Art in Paris has fostered an impressive number of scholarly publications.^[1] Many of these are directly related to the Forum's mission, which is to connect art historical research in France and Germany, in particular by pursuing a research agenda focused on the artistic relations between the two countries. Among the Forum's publications, few fit its mission more naturally than the edited correspondence between the French painter Henri Fantin-Latour (1836–1904) and his German counterpart Otto Scholderer (1834–1902), recently issued by the Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in the Forum's series Passages/Passagen.

Edited by a Franco-German team of scholars, including Mathilde Arnoux, Thomas W. Gaehtgens, and Anne Tempelaere-Panzani, *Correspondance entre Henri Fantin-Latour et Otto Scholderer (1858–1902)* contains a selection of the forty-four-year exchange of letters between two artists who met in Paris as students and remained lifelong friends, even though (or, perhaps, because) they lived in different countries most of their lives. Of this correspondence, unique in its duration and its international character, 308 letters have been preserved, that is to say all the letters of Scholderer and the letters of Fantin-Latour from 1870 until Scholderer's death in 1902.^[2] The current edition comprises about two thirds of the total; the full exchange will be published online on the Forum's website.^[3]

Fantin-Latour and Scholderer met in the spring of 1857 as both were copying paintings in the Louvre. Fantin, who made copies for a living,^[4] was a "regular" in the museum; Scholderer had only recently come from Germany on what would turn out to be a one-year study trip to the French capital. The two artists soon became close, and Fantin introduced Scholderer to his

circle of friends, many of whom were former students of Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran, teacher extraordinaire at what was then called the Ecole Impériale de Dessin. Among them were Jean-Charles Cazin, Alphonse Legros, Léon Ottin, Marc-Louis-Emmanuel Solon, and Edmond-Eugène Valton.

Inasmuch as Scholderer was enamored with the Parisian art scene, he returned to Frankfurt in spring 1858 and soon after wrote his first letter to Fantin, with whom he would correspond until his death. Though unhappy in Frankfurt, which he found provincial and conservative, and always claiming to be nostalgic for Paris, he never opted to move to the French capital.^[5] Instead, in 1871, he settled in London, where he was to stay for most of his life.^[6] The move was motivated, no doubt, by that city's reputation as a center for the contemporary art trade.^[7] Fantin himself sold much of his art in London (through his friends Edwin and Ruth Edwards, who also helped Scholderer market his work) and several of his friends, including Legros and Solon, like Scholderer, moved permanently to the British capital.^[8]

As a result of Scholderer's move to England, his correspondence with Fantin has a broad geographical range, as it deals with the art scene in France and Germany, as well as Great Britain. It confirms a phenomenon of which historians of the period are well—though not always sufficiently—aware, namely, the international character of the art world of the second half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the correspondence offers a fascinating insider's view of a highly connected world, in which artists traveled, exhibited abroad, marketed their works in other countries, and had numerous international contacts. Fantin and Scholderer spent as much time discussing Camille Corot, Gustave Courbet, Edouard Manet, and the Impressionists, as they did debating the merits of the art of Peter von Cornelius, Frederic Leighton, John Everett Millais, Hans Thoma, Adolf Menzel, and James McNeill Whistler.

Nearly everyone working on the art of the second half of the nineteenth century will find important new information and insights in this publication, relating to his or her field of interest. This reviewer is particularly fascinated by the correspondence dealing with Gustave Courbet. Not only does it provide a good deal of new information about Courbet's stay in Frankfurt from August 1858 until February 1859, during which time Scholderer, just back from France, became well acquainted with him, but also it shows how Courbet was seen and appreciated by his contemporaries in Germany. In his own letters, Courbet boasts that everyone in Frankfurt was full of admiration for his art,^[9] but Scholderer informs us that the view of his art was mostly negative: "One is not charmed by his painting in Frankfurt and at times I hear opinions that almost scare me. I tell you, nobody, nobody wants him."^[10]

The letters also show how our assumptions about the way artistic contacts were formed can be completely off the mark. Who would have thought that Courbet first saw the work of Fantin-Latour in Frankfurt? Indeed, as Scholderer became acquainted with Courbet (their studios in the Städelsches Kunstinstitut were right above one another), he showed him not only his own works, but also two paintings by Fantin, which he had brought with him to Germany—a portrait of Alphonse Legros (Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Tanenbaum, Toronto) and a self-portrait (Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp). Scholderer writes to Fantin that Courbet looked at them closely, judged them very beautiful, and remarked that Fantin's art was not for the bourgeoisie ("ce n'est pas la peinture pour le bourgeois").^[11] It was Scholderer's praise of Courbet and his repeated affirmation that Courbet liked his work that

caused Fantin, three years later (in December 1861), to enroll as a student in Courbet's short-lived atelier in the rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs. Though he painted some studies there, he soon tired of the atelier from which Courbet was largely absent. In one of the lost letters to Scholderer, he must have expressed his disappointment, as Scholderer responds: "What you say about Courbet is quite true, I believe. He is no longer who he was.... nonetheless, I still think that his painting is superb...."[12]

Correspondance entre Fantin-Latour et Otto Scholderer contains a wealth of new material, not only in the letters themselves, but also in the rich and thorough annotations as well as the scholarly apparatus—timelines and lists of works by both artists, as well as a lengthy bibliography. The three introductory essays each bring something different to our appreciation of the correspondence. Thomas Gaehtgens emphasizes its international aspect, which, as he rightly points out, addresses not only contemporary art, but also music, in which both artists had a great interest (Scholderer played the violin and Fantin shared in the French Wagner-mania). He also touches upon the way in which politics, in particular the Franco-Prussian war, figures in the two artists' correspondence. Scholderer has little sympathy for "the Prussiens," and regrets the end of the rule of Napoleon III ("*notre bon empereur*").[13] By contrast, Fantin feels that France is bankrupt, culturally and politically, while Germany, thanks to Otto von Bismarck and Helmuth von Moltke (*des gens bien modernes*), is evolving and progressing.[14] Anne Tempelaere-Panzani writes in detail about the origin of the friendship between the two artists and the nature of their correspondence. She points to Scholderer's difficulty writing in French and suggests that this may actually have been an advantage. As neither he nor Fantin were trying to impress the other with a highly literary prose style, the letters have a directness and immediacy that makes them very readable. Finally, Mathilde Arnoux emphasizes that the letters not only provide a wonderful panorama of the art world of the second half of the nineteenth century, but also present an insight into each artist's attitude toward, and convictions about, art. Scholderer, she remarks, was by nature a conceptual artist, "il ne réfléchit plus qu'il travaille;"[15] Fantin, by contrast, was primarily a painter, who went wrong when he thought too much, as for example, in his aborted allegorical painting *Le Toast*.

In conclusion, *Correspondance entre Henri Fantin-Latour et Otto Scholderer* is a must-read for anyone interested in the art world of the last four decades of the nineteenth century. It is full of surprising facts and insights and greatly enriches our understanding of this very interesting period in art history on the eve of the birth of Modernism. Both Fantin and Scholderer were largely independent artists, neither associated with the academy nor with any of the "rebel" groups of the period—the Pre-Raphaelites in England or the Impressionists in France. They were well informed about the art of their time, without being aware of what happened on the margins. One looks in vain in the correspondence for the names of Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat or Vincent van Gogh, and that, in itself, is telling. If nothing else, the letters make us aware of the distortions in our contemporary view of the late nineteenth century.

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Notes

- [1] For a complete list, see <http://www.dtforum.org/index.php?id=5>.
- [2] Fantin kept all the letters of Scholderer, which his widow gave to his dealer and friend Gustave Tempelaere. Since January 2011, they are in the collection of the Fondation Custodia in Paris. The early letters of Fantin to Scholderer (before 1871) have not been found but the letters from 1871 to 1901 are today in the Universitätsbibliothek Johann Christian Senckenberg in Frankfurt, a bequest of Scholderer's son.
- [3] See *Correspondance*, 13, n. 2.
- [4] At the time he met Scholderer, he was working on one of his five (!) copies of Veronese's *Marriage of Cana*. See *Correspondance*, 15 and 71.
- [5] But he did make several trips to Paris—in 1868 (one month); in 1869 (approx. six months); in 1870 (approx. 4 months) and in 1890 (short stay).
- [6] He returned to Frankfurt in December 1899, some two years before his death.
- [7] See Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, "The Lu(c)re of London: French Artists and Art Dealers in the British Capital, 1859–1914," in: *Monet's London: Artistic Reflections on the Thames, 1859–1914*, exh. cat. (St. Petersburg, FL: Museum of Fine Arts, 2005), 40–54.
- [8] Legros became a teacher at the Slade School; Solon the director of the Minton Potteries.
- [9] See Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, ed., *Correspondance de Courbet* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), 147–152.
- [10] "...on n'est pas enchanté de sa peinture à Francfort et quelquefois j'entends des jugements qui me font presque peur, je vous dis personne, personne ne le veut!. *Correspondance*, 64–65.
- [11] *Correspondance*, 61.
- [12] "Ce que vous dites de Courbet, c'est bien vrai je crois, il n'est plus celui d'autrefois... cependant, je trouve que c'est toujours encore une peinture superbe..." *Correspondance*, 87.
- [13] *Correspondance*, 143.
- [14] *Correspondance*, 147–48.
- [15] *Correspondance*, 39.