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Chris Stolwijk, editor

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Current Issues in 19th-Century Art: Van Gogh Studies 1

Dr. Chris Stolwijk, editor

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The Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam has built a reputation for outstanding scholarship, especially in terms of contextualizing the career of its namesake. The museum staff has assumed the duty of placing the life and work of Vincent van Gogh in relation to his era, so they have not only exhibited the work of van Gogh, but also many of the major and minor figures in the world around him. In 1994, they sponsored Aimée Brown Price's Puvis de Chavannes exhibition, a show desperately needed by that time. In 2004, the museum produced the magisterial *The Origins of Art Nouveau: the Bing Empire* with its spectacular catalogue edited by Gabriel Weisberg, Edwin Becker, and Evelyne Possémé. While completely understanding the modernist, avant-garde art of van Gogh, the museum has consistently tried to illuminate the mixed artistic world in which he moved. And the present volume of essays continues the museum's efforts to make "the art of van Gogh and his contemporaries accessible to the widest possible public." How very straightforward and refreshing! It is also gratifying, at a time when it is increasingly difficult to publish scholarship of any kind—it's still difficult to believe that the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* was allowed to disappear—to see a museum ready to take on a new series of intellectual publications. *Van Gogh Studies* will appear annually and the publication has an impressive editorial board that should set a high standard for future issues. "Curtains up!" indeed, as Chris Stolwijk, editor-in-chief of the project states in his preface. This is a very good moment for historians of nineteenth-century art.

Current Issues in 19th-Century Art, this first edition of *Van Gogh Studies*, offers a good array of articles by major figures in the field, and younger art historians as well. The collection opens with an essay by one of the big names in nineteenth-century art history, Robert Herbert, who here takes on the work of Henry Nocq, not at all a household name to most historians. Nocq was a friend of Toulouse-Lautrec, and Herbert offers a fairly detailed analysis of his *Enquête sur l'évolution des industries d'art* of 1896. The concept of the decorative in art was major stuff in the last decades of the nineteenth century—witness Puvis de Chavannes,

Albert Aurier, Claude Monet, and any number of other important artists and critics—but Nocq’s investigation was about the state of the “real” decorative arts, a nice addition to the literature on the world of Art Nouveau. Nocq was a curious character and his investigation was uneven, a bit difficult to contextualize, but one comes away from Herbert’s article with a firm sense of what the investigation was all about.

Louis Van Tilborgh’s, “Van Gogh in Cormon’s studio: A chronological puzzle,” is a model of careful research and refined reasoning. One of the advantages that collections of essays such as this have over the major juried publications in the field is that they can publish items of very specific significance, but of perhaps limited interest to the wider field of art history. Such is this piece by Van Tilborgh, curator of research at the Van Gogh Museum. The specific months of van Gogh’s brief attendance at Cormon’s studio—his actual name, as Van Tilborgh notes, was Fernand Piestra—may not be the stuff of legend, but the information is compelling and admirable when it is pinpointed with precision, as happens here. Van Tilborgh notes the central discrepancy between accounts by Théo van Gogh’s widow and Emile Bernard concerning the time van Gogh left Cormon’s studio. It’s basically a matter of four months difference; June for Jo van Gogh, October for Bernard. Van Tilborgh settles the matter—Bernard was wrong—but more importantly, he uses fine stylistic analysis of the artist’s work from 1888 to prove his point. It’s the kind of clarification and precision that has marked research at the Van Gogh Museum for years, and it’s fun to read.

June Hargrove has made a career studying nineteenth-century European sculpture and she puts her knowledge to good use in “Against the grain: the sculpture of Paul Gauguin in the context of his contemporaries.” It wasn’t all that long ago that art historians were woefully ignorant about the sculpture of the period, a little Rodin here and there was all that most noticed. The installation of sculpture among the paintings at the Musée d’Orsay—introducing the wonders of the period to a new audience—went a long way toward a remedy, and so has Hargrove. Here she places Gauguin’s sculpture in relation to the world of sculpture he knew himself, sometimes reacting violently against it, sometimes taking cues from it. So while he clearly was not influenced by Carrier-Belleuse, it is still good to see his primitive stoneware placed in conjunction with the academic’s suave terracotta *Leda and the Swan*, as a perfect opposition. Equally of interest are the possible connections between Jean Carriès *Parsifal Gate* of 1890-1904, Rodin’s *Gates of Hell*, and Gauguin’s carvings for the *Maison du Jour*. Félix Fénéon was making fun of Gauguin when he called him a “statuaire,” but Hargrove demonstrates the fierceness of Gauguin’s sculpture, its otherness and innovation.

No one can resist the letters of Vincent van Gogh, but Joan Greer presents a fascinating investigation of how a few of them were used by the Flemish periodical *Van Nu & Straks* (Of Now and Tomorrow) which was first published in 1893. Greer convincingly shows that the publication nationalized the artist, and marshaled his writings in favor of their championing of “an art that would represent the rural poor and their environments.” In a very close reading of the editorial choices of the publication, Greer offers a reminder that each generation makes its own heroes, not necessarily badly or incorrectly, but with clear self-interest.

In “Careers and Canvases: The rise of the market for modern art in nineteenth-century Paris,” David W. Galenson and Robert Jensen take on one of the icons of the new art history, Harrison and Cynthia White’s 1965 publication, *Canvases and Careers: Institutional change in the French painting world*, with its innovative concentration on the art market rather than the art. Galenson and Jensen are not out to return to the object, but rather to set the record straight on the art market. Counter to the Whites’s, they demonstrate just how important the annual Salons and Salon criticism were in making careers, and anyone who has spent time reading the massive volumes of criticism from the period will see the truth of their assertion. It is instructive to see how they downplay the role of dealers in making the careers of artists, refuting the White’s emphasis on dealers such as Durand-Ruel and others, and doing so with an impressive array of information.

Paul Gauguin was not a character to inspire sympathy. Self-absorbed even more than most artists, he treated his wife, his children, and his fellow artists poorly. So it is surprising that the last two articles in this collection are so moving. Yet they are. Elise Ackermann, “Out of sight, out of mind? Paul Gauguin’s struggle for recognition after his departure for the South Seas in 1895,” details the artist’s maneuvering to stay in touch with the Parisian art world and, somehow, the artist comes across as sympathetic. He even returned the 200 francs that the Directeur des Beaux-Arts sent to him, refusing to “beg the state for anything.” Ackermann shows how Gauguin, ever the businessman, devised a scheme to create a syndicate of investors to make regular purchases of his works. But the scheme fell through, much to the chagrin of those approached, who years later could have realized remarkable profits. Gauguin’s suspicions of the dealer Ambroise Vollard, and his desperation as sickness consumed him are amazingly poignant here as they are, even more so, in the final article of the collection.

Carolyn Boyle-Turner’s “Paul Gauguin’s well rediscovered in Atuona, Hiva Oa (French Polynesia),” has gotten quite a bit of attention already. Google “Gauguin’s Well” and you’ll get several hits that make reference to the article, many of them quoting Boyle-Turner. After detailing information about Gauguin’s house on Hiva Oa, with its unusual well—the Marquesans got their water from springs—Boyle-Turner dryly lists the items discovered when the well was unearthed in February 2000. Contents are listed in three categories: “Items relating to Gauguin’s health,” “Household effects,” and “Artistic materials,” and it all makes fascinating reading. We learn that Gauguin was using Sloans Liniment, “an unguent rubbed onto the skin to soothe aches and pains by warming the affected area.” Four highly decayed teeth found in the well suggest “that their owner must have suffered a great deal of pain until their extraction.” And so on. It’s not that we haven’t known of Gauguin’s suffering before. He was more than willing to detail all of his problems in letters back to his supporters in France. But the listing of all these objects is stunningly affecting, and one is reminded that there really was a time when artists suffered for their work. No matter that he was, as Joan Greer shows, a plotting careerist. His careerism was inept, pitiful, almost endearing compared to the day-to-day career management we have become used to today. And it all took place, as Boyle-Turner reminds us, so very, very far from his home country, where his well now stands as mute witness to his painful and difficult end.

The essays in this collection are blessedly free of jargon, not a single gerund in any of the titles. The book feels very good in the hands. It is nicely designed in a reserved sort of way.

The paper is thick and feels solid. Reproductions are not spectacular, but are certainly adequate, the sense is of a publication offering intellectual, not visual, delights. A helpful ribbon marker allows quick access to endnotes. It's easy to imagine a bookshelf full of future issues of *Van Gogh Studies* with similar bindings, sans serif lettering on cover and spine, all necessary additions to the art historian's library. I look forward to new volumes, more work on van Gogh, and more on the world of art he moved in, and to which he responded with such power.

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