

Manning on Betzer (2012)

Betzer, Sarah. *Ingres and the Studio: Women, Painting, History*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012. Pp. 308. ISBN: 978-0-271-04875-8

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Sarah Betzer's study of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867) and his students asks how the artist's richly realized female portraits, which span his entire career, could be viewed as part of the practice of history painting that continued to define the goals of the most ambitious artists during this period. Betzer builds on recent art historical work that resists the notion of Ingres as a passé academician by resituating his work more thoroughly in the critical and social milieu of the mid-nineteenth century. In this case, Betzer takes issue with the perpetual characterization of Ingres's engagement with female portraiture as the result of the artist being a "lover of women" (12-13); this dismissal, as well as descriptions of these female subjects as stone-like, frozen, or unfeminine, have limited their previous critical interpretations.

Betzer responds by centering her analysis on the personal and pedagogical philosophies that gave way to a "powerful emulative nexus" (9) within Ingres's studios in Paris and Rome and sustained Ingres's explorations of the classical foundations of history painting. Building on models from Norman Bryson's *Tradition and Desire* (1984) and Thomas Crow's *Emulation* (1995; revised 2006), she engages and extends their structures of studio tradition and innovation into mid-century by suggesting that Ingres's most deliberate differentiation of his practice from that of his teacher David came about in his attempts to picture his modern female sitters through classicizing visual idioms. He inscribes the female body as a subject of history and, therefore, as an appropriate subject of history painting.

Betzer's first two chapters examine Ingres's motivations in turning to female portraiture. For Ingres, Betzer views the question of portrait versus history painting "procedurally rather than as a question of genre or theme" (30). Her first chapter addresses Ingres's approach to *Madame Moitessier* (1856), which maintained the technical processes of history painting by working from the nude model and appropriating a classical pose. Ingres, Betzer argues, uses these strategies to create a monumental, ideal figure from the "faulty particularities" (61) of his sitter, exposing how he engaged with contemporary aesthetic debates through portraiture. Betzer's second chapter probes the role of Ingres's studio in these debates over the real versus the ideal, in which his students participated by submitting scores of female portraits to the Salon. Betzer productively uses contemporary criticism, which coined the term *ingriste*, and responses from Ingres's students, to establish the extent to which critics viewed Ingres as a master and denigrated his students as unoriginal.

The subsequent chapters then turn primarily to Ingres's students, each identifying a student and a distinguished female sitter that he frequently portrayed and whom Ingres portrayed at least once. Betzer then proceeds to examine how each case interwove allegiances to classical precedents to further the studio's aesthetic ideology. Chapter four thus considers Julie Mottez, the wife of Ingres's student, Victor Mottez, along with the efforts of Julie, Victor, and Ingres to study antiquities during Ingres's tenure as head of the Roman Académie de France. While Ingres revised the Académie's curriculum to include classical archaeology, Victor Mottez experimented with recreating antique frescoes, producing a stunning fresco portrait of Julie (1836-37). Betzer argues that because Ingres often affectionately displayed Julie's image, and because it spurred further portraits of Julie by Mottez and Chassériau, it functions as a "critical index of *ingriste* practice" (141) through which female portraits could embody social bonds between the artists.

The fourth chapter furthers this theme, using Henri Lehmann's portraits of Marie d'Agoult, an art critic and frequent interlocutor for the group, which promoted her own valuation of the *ingriste* aesthetic as one that "prioritized monumental, powerful female subjects" (146). Betzer here employs d'Agoult's incisive assessments of Ingres's circle to support her own similar contention that these artists approached portraiture as an intellectual exercise—in d'Agoult's case, her portraits embrace the androgynous construction of her public role which unified the femininity of a muse with the supposed masculinity of a great mind.

Betzer's final chapter addresses another woman's double role with the actress Rachel (Élisabeth Rachel Félix), most notably portrayed in Amaury-Duval's *Tragedy (Portrait of Rachel)* (1854). Rachel's purposeful marketing of herself as the Muse of Tragedy—a remnant of antiquity in modernity—made her an attractive *ingriste* subject. In obscuring her body and rendering her skin marmoreal, Amaury-Duval defeminizes Rachel and transforms her into a classical statue. This, argues Betzer, is neither derivative nor unsuccessful, as critics charged, but entirely in keeping with the *ingriste* devotion to female portraits as history paintings grounded in antique forms.

Consequently, Betzer frames Ingres as an innovator whose contributions surpassed struggles waged on academic terrain. By probing the distinction between academic and *ingriste*, established via the portrait-as-history and negotiated through the bodies of Ingres's female sitters, Betzer rejects old criticisms to establish *ingriste* practice as a crucial bridge to modernity, an idea forwarded by her conclusion's examination of Edgar Degas's *The Bellelli Family* (1858-67) as a history portrait. In this handsomely illustrated and persuasively written text, however, Betzer's true contribution lies in her excavation of Ingres's frequently dismissed students, many of whom have received relatively minimal critical consideration in the art historical literature.

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