

Marvick on Allan et al, eds (2019)

Allan, Scott, et al, editors. *Manet and Modern Beauty: The Artist's Last Years*. The J. Paul Getty Museum and The Art Institute of Chicago, 2019, pp. xv + 384, ISBN 978-1-606066-04-1

Louis Marvick, University of Nevada, Reno

This impressive volume of nine illustrated scholarly essays and eighty-seven full-page plates was edited by the curators of the largest exhibition of Édouard Manet's late work ever assembled. The scale and ambition of the project are attested by four pages of acknowledgments and a list of fifty-four lenders to the exhibition. Most of the contributions are attempts to "read" Manet's paintings and sketches through a combination of formal analysis, allusions to the political, cultural, and literary context of the painter's last years (he died aged fifty-one in 1883), and the critic's imagination. The essays by Scott Allan and Emily A. Beeny are especially well argued.

In "*Faux Frère: Manet and the Salon, 1879–83*," Allan expertly describes Manet's calculated response to the favorable official attitude towards him under the fine arts administration of his friend, Antonin Proust. Many years of *succès de scandale* had not blunted Manet's appetite for official recognition. But when it came, his newfound respectability exposed him to the potential reproach of treachery from hard-core *refusés*. Allan shows how each of the pictures Manet chose to exhibit in the last years of his life implied a criticism of some well-known picture by another artist. His 1880 portrait of Antonin Proust "as an elegant man-about-town [. . .] seized mid-*flânerie*" (17), with its apparently spontaneous brushwork and breezy, unofficial air, made a pointed contrast with Léon Bonnat's grave, polished, monumental portrait of Jules Grévy, exhibited in the same year. Similarly, having "situated [himself] as a fashionable insider" by including narrative implications in *Dans la serre* (1879) that align it with story-telling pictures by Louise Abbéma and Henri Gervex, Manet spent the capital of respectability he had thus acquired to redeem his daring experiment in "*japoniste cropping*" (22) with *En bateau* (1874). Allan is equally convincing in his account of how Manet's "openly provocative" portrait of the intransigent radical Henri Rochefort was read as a declaration of the painter's own refusal to be "quietly assimilated into the new *juste milieu*" (29).

In "Manet and the Eighteenth Century," Beeny emphasizes the painter's discovery of "a specifically French 'depth of integrity' and 'sense of truth'" (92) in Chardin and Watteau. She finds striking points of comparison between still lifes, full-length portraits, painterly techniques, and larger mimetic purposes. In discussing Fragonard's influence, for example, Beeny observes that "Manet's new manner, his dissolution of form into light, may be a toilette scene [*Before the Mirror*], shivering, sensuous, yet [it is] peculiarly chaste" and thus "len[ds] modesty to the erotic subjects [. . .] synonymous with Fragonard's name" (101). Like Allan, Beeny supports a novel critical argument with scrupulous attention to original sources and a convincing discussion of stylistic features.

The volume contains some unfortunate misunderstandings of French which detract only slightly from the scholarly merits of the essays. For example, in "Manet's Little Nothings," Carol Armstrong devotes two paragraphs to a discussion of the quatrain Manet wrote beneath a watercolor plum: "à Isabelle/cette mirabelle/et la plus belle/c'est Isabelle" (120), but mistakes Manet's elegant comparison (*la plus belle [des deux]*) for a superlative construction, stating that the poem is "easy to translate: 'To Isabelle, this mirabelle, and the loveliest, is Isabelle'" (121). Armstrong's enthusiastic celebration of these overlooked trifles sometimes gets the better of her attention to the prosaic matter of correct word-choice (as when, for example, she refers to "the sumptuary [sic] complexity of *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*" (118)). In "Manet's *Fleurs du mal*," Bridget Alsdorf contrasts the "revolting stench of Baudelaire's 'Charogne'" with the "disturbing perfume" (136) of Manet's *Olympia*, but overlooks the fact that the decomposing corpse of Baudelaire's poem is also the occasion of a transcendent vision (in the lines following "une étrange musique/Comme l'eau courante et le vent"), and goes on to claim that the contrast "is typical of the difference in sensibility between painter and poet" (136). Her discussion would have been more balanced if she had mentioned Baudelaire's celebration of delicious odors in poems such as "Le Parfum" and "La Chevelure." Alsdorf seems to have misunderstood the phrase "la faute idéale des roses" (*the ideal lack of roses*) from "L'Après-midi d'un Faune": "For Mallarmé, roses were not nature but rather 'a false ideal'" (*sic*, 141). Some signs of uncertainty in the use of French are minor and do not affect the author's meaning; for example, the pervasive misuse of the adjective *parisienne* (with lower-case *p*) for the noun *Parisienne* (upper case).

Elsewhere, however, the cogency of the argument would have been strengthened by more assured editorial control. In her discussion of a contemporary "caricature of Manet's *In the Conservatory*" (46), for example, Helen Burnham misses the pun on the word *serre*. The caption reads, "DANS LA SERRE. Une pauvre jeune personne innocente est prise dans la serre d'un perfide séducteur." Burnham translates this as "In the Conservatory: an innocent young person taken in the conservatory by a

perfidious seducer,” and concludes that the caption is of a piece with the “mildly seductive elements” in the caricature that keep it “well within the bounds of bourgeois propriety” (46). But *serre* also means “talon”; *prise dans la serre* connotes the action of a raptor seizing its prey (cf. to rape, i.e. to snatch and carry away). The implication is darker than Burnham realizes. In contrast to these small disappointments, Beeny’s translation of Samuel Rodary’s selection of Manet’s letters from the French (161–83) is impeccable.

All in all, the variety and scholarly excellence of the contributions to this magnificently illustrated volume make it an indispensable resource for anyone interested in exploring the last phase in the career of this scrupulously observant, tirelessly inventive painter of modern life.

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