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Paula J. Birnbaum, *Women Artists in Interwar France: Framing Femininities*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011. 358 pp. Illustrations, and appendix. £70.00. (hb). ISBN 978-0-7546-6978-4.

Review by Karen E. Brown, Trinity College, Dublin.

*Women Artists in Interwar France*, by Paula J. Birnbaum, is an ambitious project aiming to recover the artistic lives and cultural achievements of members of a group called the Société des Femmes Artistes Modernes (FAM), who exhibited in Paris between 1931 and 1938. By reconstructing this “little-known chapter in the history of French modernism,” Birnbaum brings to light a rich socio-cultural history largely overlooked in histories of the avant-garde (p. xvii). Joining scholars working over the past four decades in gender and modernism studies, Birnbaum offers a fresh critique of women’s contributions to visual culture between the wars, and attempts to unravel why so many of them have been excluded from the canon of art history. Her new book adds to a growing literature in this area.[1] In it, Birnbaum situates herself most closely with Whitney Chadwick’s *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, for Chadwick also recovers a history of a defined group of women artists in the interwar period, and considers the issue of female embodiment in the context of a male-dominated avant-garde.[2]

The best-known women from FAM include Suzanne Valadon (1865-1938), Marie Laurencin (1883-1965) and Tamara de Lempicka (1898-1980), all of whom have full-length studies written about their lives and work. And yet between the wars, Paris attracted artists from across the globe from a variety of backgrounds, a diversity evident in the aims of the women’s art collective of over 100 artists listed by Birnbaum in an appendix. Taking full account of the contexts and confines in which these women worked, one of Birnbaum’s major research innovations is to broach issues in diaspora studies as they relate to the gender of modernism. In this context, she outlines how women artists who were non-nationals working in Paris in the 1930s faced additional pressures. They had to negotiate foreign nationalism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism, as well as post-war pressures on women by the state relating to economic and social order. On individual and collective levels, FAM enabled these women to challenge gender stereotypes by giving visual form to their responses to French social mores and the post-war *rappel à l’ordre*.

On reading the preface, one becomes increasingly aware that Birnbaum will be taking the reader into uncharted territory through her extensive archival searches in libraries, galleries and private homes in Paris and beyond, leading to an exciting, rich, and original portrait of a vibrant Parisian art world. As existing studies of art and gender have taught us, in the opening decades of the twentieth century women were generally objectified in art as ideal mothers or sexually available nudes. The paintings discussed by Birnbaum challenge the truth of these stereotypes, and her argument is structured around three main themes: motherhood, self-portraiture, and the female nude.

*Women Artists in Interwar France* glides easily from one chapter-topic to the next, building a composite image of FAM exhibitions, and a balanced view of the individual and collective challenges and successes of the group. Consistently situating her case studies in the context of a wider cultural arena, Birnbaum cites the popular press and contemporary fiction and poetry, among other sources. This method adds colour and authenticity to her narrative, and creates an impression of the surrounding milieu in which

these women artists worked. Birnbaum also provides us with fifty-eight full-colour illustrations, in addition to selected black and white ones, thus encouraging prolonged contemplation of the artworks in relation to her arguments.

For instance, Birnbaum discusses the theme of motherhood in the careers of Marie-Anne Camaz-Zoegger, Berthe Morrisot, Chana Orloff, Suzanne Valadon, Tamara de Lempicka, Maria Blanchard and Mela Muter, in order to probe the relationship between artistic creativity and productivity in their private and public lives. FAM's founder Camaz-Zoegger emerges as a diplomatic, but ultimately conservative leader for the group. While her paintings address the theme of mother and child, allowing the artist to reflect on depictions of the female body, they were promoted within a framework of hegemonic, patriarchal norms. By contrast, de Lempicka's *Maternity* (1928) (also reproduced as this book's cover) reflects the traditional Italian "Madonna and Child" theme in subject matter and execution, but the sitter's clothing and facial expression portray an alternative and ambivalent attitude towards breastfeeding and motherhood generally, thus challenging traditional notions of maternal tenderness associated with postwar pronatalism. Birnbaum situates her topic in context, illustrating a contemporary poster promoting breastfeeding, and citing *La Mère Educatrice*, a popular women's magazine, on procreation and motherhood as women's greatest achievement, before going on to deepen her discussion by looking at depictions of women and children from working-class backgrounds. Considering the reception of works by Maria Blanchard and Mela Muter, a Polish Jew, she cites critics who were insistent on a right-wing appropriation of women's art, thus relaying the growing nationalism, chauvinism, and xenophobia of that time in France. Birnbaum concludes: "It is precisely this representation of diverse social classes, sexualities, races and ethnicities that made FAM so productive as a female artistic enterprise in France at this time" (p. 77).

Going on to re-evaluate the well-known self-portraits of Laurencin in chapter four, Birnbaum argues that this artist successfully negotiated her position as a *femme peintre* by manipulating public discourse about her work through masquerade. In this way she builds on scholarship of Elizabeth Louise Kahn and others, arguing that, "Laurencin's stereotypically feminized imagery became a self-empowering mechanism for asserting her own highly successful professional identity as one of the only women admitted to the fringes of the Parisian avant-garde" (p. 110). By contrast, Alice Halika suffered as an artist-émigré in Paris, and her work has remained largely unknown in subsequent histories of art. By tracing the major achievement of her *oeuvre* in terms of her relationship with her husband, the cubist painter Louis Marcoussis, Birnbaum reveals an increasing self-effacement in Halika's career which was an integral part of her self-representation as an artist. Birnbaum's argument is constructed around two key works: *The Studio* (1924), analysed as an allegory of familial roles in this period of the painter's career, and *Place de la Concorde* (1933), painted in the style of Giorgio de Chirico and Raoul Dufy. Birnbaum astutely discusses the latter work as evidence of Halika's self-fashioning as belonging to the centre (Paris) where displacement (as a woman painter and a Polish Jew) was no longer part of her artistic identity and the artist was able to promote her art to French nationalist sentiment.

Having discussed images of motherhood and self-portraiture, Birnbaum then moves to the quintessential site of patriarchal dominance in the visual arts: the nude. Until the closing decades of the nineteenth century, drawing and painting the nude in Europe had been the sole premise of the male artist, which in turn informed the artist's success in historical, mythological and religious painting. In this context, as T. J. Clarke and Tamar Garb have shown, the female nude becomes commodified for a bourgeois, heterosexual male viewer.<sup>[3]</sup> Building on their work and that of Gill Perry in particular, Birnbaum discusses nudes that challenge, or play with, the sexual politics of spectatorship and patriarchal traditions associated with the genre in Western art, but specifically the French viewing public. Turning to focus on nudes by Valadon and de Lempicka, Birnbaum makes an extensive case study of their paintings *Adam and Eve*, dating from 1909 and 1931 respectively.

FAM exhibited these and other works by female artists, both living and deceased, in prominent Parisian venues over seven years, including the Galerie Paul Rosenberg (1936) and the Galerie Charpentier on the Rue de Saint Honoré (1938). Considered collectively, these exhibitions raised public awareness of otherwise marginalized women artists, irrespective of class, nationality, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation. In chapter seven, "Painting the Perverse," Birnbaum analyses images by Valadon, de Lempinka and others that challenged public assumptions about sexuality, and the politics of spectatorship. Beginning with de Lempinka's paintings of the prostitute Rafaela, Birnbaum draws attention to the artist's identification with her subject matter, including her sexual desire for the female body. The intended spectator for these works, deduces Birnbaum, would be heterosexual, bisexual and lesbian, and the works may have catered to a particular affluent female market who endorsed her rejection of bourgeois values of domesticity. The distortion in the works ran counter to a post-cubist return to order, prompting repeated reviews of "perversion," and constituted an alternative and daring site of desire for the female nude; the odalisque in the tradition of Ingres in particular (p. 194). This interpretation of "perversity," notes Birnbaum, contrasts with that of Valadon's better-known *The Blue Nude*, which was praised for its "virility" indicating working-class embodiment, and was purchased by the government for the Musée de Luxembourg (p. 198).

Moving on to depictions of two female nudes experiencing sensual pleasure together, Birnbaum develops Lynda Nead's interpretation of such subjects as being appropriated by stereotypes of heterosexual fantasy. Arguing for female agency in the marketing and interpretation of these works, Birnbaum allows that such works produced by FAM members appealed to audiences across the political spectrum, while also challenging public expectations.

In her concluding chapter, Birnbaum strikes a reflective approach, weighing up the achievements of her research against strategies deployed in recent exhibitions held in France and the USA on women as cultural producers. Challenging the chronological approach to "-isms" canonized by Greenberg and perpetuated in many scholarly and pedagogical accounts, Birnbaum affirms that on-going projects of recovery *and* revision are required in research, publications, acquisitions, collections, and exhibitions on women artists. Appropriately, Camaz-Zoegger's daughter Geneviève was the first woman scholar to produce a thesis in the École du Louvre on a living woman artist, Valadon. Her research and other monographs on the life and works of individual visual artists will continue to resonate, but of equal significance are histories of collective endeavors and achievements considered in multi-cultural and politically prescriptive contexts, such as FAM in interwar France.

## NOTES

[1] See Paula Birnbaum and Anna Vovakov, eds., *Essays on Women's Artistic and Cultural Contributions 1919-1939: Expanded Social Roles for the New Woman following the First World War* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009); Karen E. Brown, ed., *Women's Contributions to Visual Culture, 1918-1939* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Tamar Garb, *Sisters of the Brush* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1994); Christopher Green, *Art in France 1900-1940* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001); Elizabeth Louise Kahn, *Marie Laurencin: Une Femme Inadaptée in Feminist Histories of Art* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); and Gillian Perry, *Women Artists and the Parisian Avant-Garde: Modernism and 'Feminine' Art, 1900 to the Late 1920s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

[2] Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985).

[3] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984).

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