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Sarah Lees, Ed. *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet! The Bruyas Collection from the Musée Fabre, Montpellier*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press in association with Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, 2004. 256 pp. 32 b/w + 94 color ill. \$60.00 (cl). U.S. ISBN 0-300-10523-1.

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It is not often that the importance of an exhibition resonates at so many levels. *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet! The Bruyas Collection from the Musée Fabre, Montpellier* is of these rare venues. While it enriches our understanding of nineteenth-century French art, it reinforces, in a period of political tensions, the strong cultural ties that exist between France and the United States. Indeed, the exhibition of the Bruyas collection is made possible by an extraordinary institution name FRAME. FRAME, which stands for the French Regional American Museum Exchange was born in Lyon in 1999 as the initiative of Elizabeth Rohatyn, whose husband was then U.S. Ambassador to France and Françoise Cachin, who at the time was the head of the Direction des Musées de France. The purpose of FRAME is to foster public awareness of regional museums and their collections on both sides of the Atlantic.

The organization is a consortium of eighteen museums, which has to this date launched six major traveling exhibitions from *The Triumph of French Painting: 17th-Century Masterpieces from the Museums of FRAME*, which traveled from Portland, Oregon to Dallas, Texas to *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet! The Bruyas Collection from the Musée Fabre, Montpellier*, which started its U.S. tour in Richmond, Virginia, stopped this summer in Williamstown, Massachusetts and will end in San Francisco in April 2005.^[1] In a global climate, where Museums face more and more challenges in organizing international venues for exhibitions, the success of FRAME comes from the emphasis that each of its members places on personal interaction and close cooperation. The catalogue edited by Sarah Lees, Assistant Curator of Paintings, at the Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, which accompany the exhibition is the perfect way to measure the quality and the high standards of scholarship that have become the staple of FRAME's exhibitions.

While the history of French painting in the nineteenth century has often been written as the opposition of various groups of rebellious artists against the much centralized power of the Academy, *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet! The Bruyas Collection from the Musée Fabre, Montpellier* allows its audience to temper this vision by exploring the role played by an individual collector in shaping the progress of French avant-garde art. But more importantly it gives some credits back to pioneer collectors such as Alfred Bruyas allowing us to understand how private collectors' taste have shaped regional collections. While the Academy, disregarding public taste, supported blindly the obsolete dictate of the *grande peinture*, such a collection reflects the taste of a different segment of society. Bourgeois collectors, such as Bruyas, present us with a subtler, less exclusive and more diverse vision of nineteenth-century French painting. This vision is based on alternative criteria for inclusion, where personal relationship with the artist and an interest in landscape and modern-life realist genre painting are often of paramount importance.

This exhibition is a celebration of the art collection as private enjoyment, where the physical engagement with the art of looking is one of the important driving forces behind the selection of art works. Such an exhibition centered on the object rather than on an obtuse concept is in itself in this age a rather refreshing take. But the bequest of his collection by Bruyas to his hometown of Montpellier in 1876, which had been preceded by a partial donation in 1868 carries an even more important significance. Beyond these private acts of connoisseurship, in the company of enlightened friends, poets,

artists, businessmen, *rentiers*, judges and other members of local *sociétés savantes*, art had for Bruyas another essential function. And indeed, the exhibition enables us to understand better the social relevance that art had for a generation that had been shaped by the republican ideals of the 1848 Revolution and by the utopian spirit of the teaching of the Fourierists.

To most familiar with the history of nineteenth-century French painting, Alfred Bruyas, son of a preeminent Montpellier banker is remembered for his short-lived but intense friendship with Gustave Courbet. It is symptomatic that until this exhibition, it was only the story of that friendship that was remembered as Bruyas's contribution to art history. Their friendship, which in many regards was more a collaboration than just a friendship, stands in fact as a new model of patronage. It came to crystallize the effort of an ambitious amateur, whose desire was to rival the patronage of the French State, to establish a strong regional artistic voice opposing the centralization imposed by the Academy. One of the many achievements of this exhibition is its success at completing the picture by putting the well-known Bruyas/Courbet episode in its wider context. Bruyas, a trained amateur painter was, before meeting Courbet, a close friend of Alexandre Cabanel, with whom he established a professional relationship by commissioning a portrait in 1846. This pattern of patronage continued with Octave Tassaert, a realist painter and with Manet's teacher Thomas Couture, who painted two portraits for Bruyas in 1850. The painting by Courbet of 1854 *The Meeting* better known as *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet!*, which gives its name to the exhibition, can be seen as the climax of this kind of patronage who privileged the personal relation between artist and patron over the traditional practices of buying art at the Paris Salon or in Parisian art galleries.

By 1853, when Bruyas bought his first paintings by Courbet, he had already published three catalogues of his collection and owned works that underscored the complexity and the diversity of France's artistic production. From the works of foremost academic painters, like Cabanel, dealing with "work, love and religion," all three important tenets of the Fourierist credo to Géricault's *Study of a Severed Arm and Legs* and works by Eugène Delacroix, such as *Michelangelo in his Studio*, Bruyas's collection testify to his commitment of rejecting the idea that French art, in order to show its national superiority, had to reflect only the precepts dictated by the French Academy.

Thanks to the generosity of two of its major benefactors the Baron François-Xavier Fabre, a neo-classical painter who lived in Florence for most of his life and Antoine Valedau, the Musée Fabre was already rich in Italian and French paintings as well as Dutch and Flemish works. Bruyas brought a gallery of living artists into the museum, and rather successfully attempted to rival the Musée du Luxembourg.^[2] For Bruyas, paintings were more than beautiful objects to be contemplated. His donation had been housed since 1868 in three specific galleries in the Musée Fabre. The care with which, as its curator he compiled of the catalogue using photographic reproduction of each work, showed that for Bruyas his collection played like the rest of the museum an essential role in supporting the development of contemporary local and national artistic production.^[3] This pedagogical concern was re-enforced when in 1869 he secured the help of Théophile Silvestre, an art critic hostile to Courbet, in an attempt to make his collection more comprehensive.

The exhibition and its catalogue rightly emphasize the essential place of Courbet's paintings in Bruyas's collection. One of the four essays of the catalogue is indeed devoted to the telling of their utopian attempt to what both of them called finding a 'solution' for social reconciliation through art. For Courbet and Bruyas art was inspiring because it was true to nature, an honest and free reflection of the artist's temperament. But it also refuses the mythologizing of the Bruyas\Courbet team by accepting the bitter ending of their collaboration and by providing a thorough account of Bruyas's involvement with collecting after the break-up with Courbet. Their break-up happened over the critical reception of *The Meeting*. Bruyas had been sorely pained by the critics' rejection of *The Meeting*, which he had lent to exhibition at the 1855 Exposition Universelle. Their break-up was finally consumed after the

publication in 1857 of Champfleury's satirical account of Bruyas's collecting habits.[4] *The Meeting* epitomized Bruyas's project of bringing realistic art to the forefront of the French artistic scene. If he was successful, he believed that this would create the right condition for universal harmony. The incapacity of the critics and of the public to see the importance of this painting, coupled a few years later by Champfleury's short story led Bruyas, profoundly disappointed to re-think his collecting philosophy.

For someone who was fortunate enough to have been able to see the exhibition over the summer at the Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, the reading of the catalogue is a rare intellectual treat. It is not often that essays, catalogue entries, and the actual works of art enhance each other so well. For the historian of nineteenth-century French art that I am, it was strange to experience these quintessential French paintings in such a picture-perfect New-England town. But somehow while the environment was completely different, Bruyas's goal of providing a place far away from a metropolis with the best examples of art of his time seemed to work. Bruyas's collection offers an alternative of seeing Impressionism as the climax of France's contribution to modern art. It reminds us that in the 1870s Delacroix, Camille Corot, Théodore Rousseau, Eugène Fromentin, and Paul Delaroche were more successful among the middle-class collectors than the Impressionists, which seems to too often summarize what French painting of second part of the nineteenth century means to a popular audience. Walking through the rooms of the Clark Institute, discovering for the first time paintings that to that day had only existed in black and white reproductions, such as Auguste Glaize's *Souvenir des Pyrénées* (1850-1851) which has been traditionally used as comparison to highlight the radical aspect of Monet's *Women in the Garden* (1866), allowed me to understand that the painting of modern life during the Second Empire had taken on many different faces. More poignant is the series of portraits that Bruyas commissioned from the various artists he believed in. From Cabanel to Couture, from Glaize, Delacroix, and Courbet, each artist has captured in priority the intensity of their patron's gaze.

If this exhibition is the celebration of a collector and his artists, the importance of the ties between patron and artist is best judged when turning to the two portraits Glaize made of Bruyas. In 1849, Glaize, despite the fact that the painting was executed in Paris, chose to stand Bruyas before ruins in the Roman countryside, wearing a *burnoose*, a shawl given to him by a friend after a trip to the Near East. There, Glaize brings together Italy as the symbol of the classical tradition and the modern as embodied by the taste for the exotic. [5] In this early painting Bruyas appears confident, young, full of the vigor and energy he admired most in Courbet's personality. Interestingly enough, in his 1854 catalogue Bruyas chose to dedicate this painting to "his comrades", feeling that it stood best for what he was trying to achieve. Then, when Glaize painted Bruyas one last time in 1876, we are left with a haunting image of an emaciated, very sick man. His red beard has lost his flamboyant color, but he proudly shows off the red ribbon of the Legion of Honor, which he had received as recognition of his artistic achievements.

Once the exhibition closed its doors in April 2005 at the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco, we are left only with the alternative of traveling to Montpellier to see many of these masterpieces again. But the catalogue published by Yale University Press will prove to be a useful reminder of the importance of Bruyas's contribution to the safeguarding of complexity of the French painting in the second half of the nineteenth century. The quality of the scholarship and the diligence with which the information is presented is coupled with an extensive number of quality color reproductions. This makes the catalogue a unique tool for anyone interested in better understanding the role played by private collectors and regional centers in the history of a country, which is still to this day often too focused on its center.

NOTES

[1] For more information on FRAME, see Tracy Kendrick, "Regional Museum Exchanges," *France Magazine*, no. 70 (Summer 2004), pp. 48-50. The exhibition *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet!* originated at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, in Richmond, Virginia, then went to Williamstown in Massachusetts, and thereafter until January 2005 at the Dallas Museum of Art and finally between January 22 and April 3, 2005, at the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco.

[2] Bruyas modeled his catalogues on the catalogues created for the Musée du Luxembourg, which was the state museum devoted to living artists. Rather than subordinating his catalogue to the official model, this was rather an act of defiance. His project was the bold announcement of his aim to sponsor modern French painting in the manner of a public institution and tough to participate in the making of a history of art. For more information, see Ting Chang, "Bruyas, Paris, and Montpellier: Artistic Center and Periphery," in the book under review, p. 49.

[3] The Bruyas Collection played not only a role in the training of local artists as the museum had done since its inception but avant-garde painters made special trips to see it, among them Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, and Paul Signac. See Françoise Cachin, "Signac's Visit to the Bruyas Collection," in Sarah Lees, ed., *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet! The Bruyas Collection from the Musée Fabre, Montpellier* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 53-57.

[4] See J. Champfleury, "L'Histoire de M. T.," *La Revue des deux mondes* (15 August 1855). In this thinly veiled satire of Bruyas, Champfleury who had stayed with Courbet in Bruyas's house during that summer ridiculed the large number of portraits M. T. has commissioned of himself.

[5] Since Napoleon's campaigns in Egypt and France's colonization of Algeria in the 1830s, Orientalist paintings had become extremely popular. Bruyas owned paintings by Fromentin and by Delacroix with Orientalist themes, such as a preparatory drawing for his 1834 *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*.

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