
H-France Review Vol. 14 (August 2014), No. 137

Patricia Leighton, *The Liberation of Painting: Modernism and Anarchism in Avant-Guerre Paris*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. xviii + 226 pp. Figures, photos, notes, bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-226-47138-9.

Review by Robyn Roslak, University of Minnesota, Duluth.

Ask historians of late modern art what comes to mind when they hear the phrase “modern art in *avant-guerre* (1905-14) Paris,” and the answer likely will be “fauvism, cubism, and orphism,” or the names of the movements’ most familiar artists: André Derain, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Sonia and Robert Delaunay. Ask instead what the phrase “modern art and left-wing politics in *avant-guerre* Paris” evokes, and chances are good there will be no answer, or at best “late neo-impressionism and anarchism.” But that should change now, with the publication of *The Liberation of Painting* and its eye-opening study of the political nature of pre-war modernism. As Patricia Leighton has shown, not only did a surprisingly large number of artists in the fauve, cubist and orphic movements consider themselves anarchists, but they made their art in a resolutely anarchist spirit in the years before World War I.

Few scholars besides Leighton have taken a close look at the intersection of French art and politics during this period, let alone the relationship between *avant-guerre* art and anarchism.^[1] Conversely, there are many studies devoted to art and anarchism in France in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when the movement as a political force began to take off and its intellectual arm grew apace.^[2] A common perception therefore is that anarchism died out in France after its supposed heyday between 1875 and 1900, and no longer had the sympathy of artists and other intellectuals. But this is a false assumption. Anarchism in its various forms—anarcho-communism; anarcho-syndicalism; anarcho-individualism; and anarchism grounded in anticolonialism and antimilitarism—remained alive and well, and continued to capture the collective imagination of many in the cultural avant-garde during the pre-war years.

The Liberation of Painting is structured around two categories of investigation: cartoons and satirical protest drawings published in popular French journals, especially the anarchist weekly *L’assiette au beurre*; and the turn toward abstraction in paintings by Picasso, Derain, Maurice Vlaminck, Kees van Dongen, and František Kupka, a stylistic choice that was as much political as it was aesthetic. Leighton shows that it was not unusual for left-wing artists, whether the avant-gardists named above or their contemporaries working in more naturalistic styles, to produce overtly politicized drawings and cartoons for a populist audience, and equally politicized paintings (but often less obviously so, due to their abstraction) for a smaller group of middle-class art collectors. An important outcome of this discovery is that artists whose work we have grown accustomed to seeing in a single medium or a single style, or who have been typecast as artists of *either* the elite *or* the people, now stand as the complex figures they really were.

Equally interesting is the close stylistic relationship Leighton has identified between avant-garde artists’ easily readable political cartoons, and their abstract or primitivized paintings and collages. Good examples are Kees van Dongen (chapter one) and Juan Gris (chapter four). The anticolonialist,

antimilitarist cartoons they both submitted to *L'assiette au beurre* relied heavily on caricature and a crude, primitivistic style (van Dongen) or flattened, geometricized form (Gris) for their aesthetic and political impact—the same formal devices that appeared more forcefully in their later paintings and collages. In the case of van Dongen, those devices “transform [his] painting into a weapon of avant-gardism” (p. 48), intensifying his anarchist-inspired critiques of prostitution and his support for those on the margins of society. But Gris’s later experiments with innovative form were conceptually different. He moved away from anarchism at the same time he began making most of his cubist work, with the result that his avant-garde paintings and collages were thoroughly depoliticized.

These differences between van Dongen and Gris, both of whom were avant-garde artists affiliated with anarchism at one time or another, point to a vital lesson we can learn from this book: the necessity of examining artists as individuals operating within a specific cluster of ideas, events and circumstances, rather than rigidly categorizing them as members of specific art or political movements, or as participants in certain exhibition venues. Leighten’s commitment to examining artists as singular entities is evident throughout her text, which allows us to discover, often for the first time, the role their art actually played in France before 1914 and what it really was “about.”

André Derain and Maurice Vlaminck (chapter one), and Picasso (chapter four) are similar cases in point. Derain and Vlaminck were anarchist sympathizers who painted in a typical fauve (anti-naturalistic and primitivized) style. While Vlaminck never wavered in claiming that his rejection of traditional naturalism was a form of anarchist activism and antimilitary conviction, Derain shared that belief only for a short period of time; yet he continued to use the fauve style in his work for a number of years thereafter. In the same way, both Picasso and Gris began constructing avant-garde collages in the period leading up to World War I, but only Picasso’s collages were political. Their clever plays on words, snippets of text from contemporary newspapers, and “anti-beautiful” (p. 137) surfaces functioned as powerful anarchist commentaries on current events.

One of the strengths of this book is its reappraisal of cubist and proto-cubist painting in chapters two and three, especially cubism’s abstract geometry and its primitivized—which often meant “Africanized”—forms. Leighten underscores how artists understood these modes of expression differently, depending upon their personal and often biased assumptions about Africa and its relationship to France. Chapter two explores the art of Picasso and others in his circle between 1905 and 1907. Their “Africanism” existed within several contexts: popular ideas about Africa promoted in France in the illustrated press and at the Universal Exhibition of 1900; social and political abuses occurring in the Belgian and French Congos; and the anticolonial sentiments of many on the left. The focal point of this chapter is Picasso’s seminal *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)* of 1907, in particular its women wearing African masks. Leighten’s reading of the painting is superb, moving from Picasso’s criticism of French colonial behavior in Africa to his stereotyping of African culture as degenerate. In the process she also offers a new way of understanding the *Femmes*, based on the relationship of its African references to Alfred Jarry’s anticolonial play *Ubu colonial*.

Chapter three extends the discussion begun in chapter two, examining how art critics understood the primitivist forms in early cubist painting. Not only did their ideas about what constituted cubist primitivizing vary considerably, ranging from references to cave art, ancient Egyptian art, contemporary African art, and the art of children, but so did their political readings of those aesthetic choices. Especially illuminating is the comparison of the responses to cubism by the left-wing writers André Salmon, Louis Vauxcelles, Léon Werth, Henri Guilbeaux, and Urbain Gohier. All five described the cubist style as primitivized, but their opinions concerning its value were markedly different. Werth and Guilbeaux are most interesting because of their common anarchist sympathies. Werth struggled—with remarkable sensitivity—to make sense of Picasso’s geometricized forms, linking them simultaneously to western “rationalism” and non-western primitivism, while Guilbeaux did nothing but condemn those forms as ugly and ridiculous.

Leighen's arguments for the variety of anarchisms that co-existed in *avant-guerre* Paris; the "multivalent aesthetics" (p. 10) of the anarchist art of this period; and the range of opinions about cubism on the part of its apologists all are indebted to the revolutionary writer Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of language (of which visual art is an example, in so far as it "speaks" or communicates). Bakhtin understood language as heteroglot, that is, as incorporating and expressing multiple world views as a result of its interaction, through dialogue, with other languages. In the same way, the interaction of art and radical politics in pre-war France resulted in a range of artistic "vocabularies" and critical responses to them. Likewise, just as Bakhtin understood language as a tool to resist authority and assert one's individuality, so the anarchist artists of this period "spoke" through their work against socio-political authority, using types of media and aesthetic vocabularies—some challenging, some more traditional—that were freely chosen and uniquely personal.

Of the many artists Leighen discusses, it is František Kupka she believes "may serve as one of the best examples of Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, as he thoughtfully experimented with media, styles, and subjects while pointedly addressing differing audiences..." (p. 146). Because of this, and because Kupka's art and writing address many of the ideas explored earlier, it makes sense that he is the subject of the book's last chapter. Its title, "Abstracting Anarchism," is deceptively simple. In reality, its material is dense, complex, and difficult to summarize in only a few words. This is hardly surprising, given Kupka's elaborate and multi-faceted version of anarchism, which was informed by science, Bergsonian philosophy, Theosophy, social ideas concerning the roles of modern women, and the anarchist geography of Élisée Reclus. But Leighen's summaries of these strands of influence, in particular the ideas of Henri Bergson and Reclus, also are a bit too brief.

Most of this chapter examines, one by one, Kupka's sources of motivation, listed above, while demonstrating at the same time how inseparable they were in the construction of his anarchist thought and the forms it took in his political cartoons, book illustrations and (especially) his fascinating abstract paintings. All of this material is grounded in Kupka's ideas about art and the creative process found in his book *La Création dans les arts plastiques* of 1912, a crucial text for understanding the radical nature of his abstract style (it, too, could use a bit more attention). Kupka claimed that in a fully-evolved artist, creative activity and its products, while inevitably shaped by material reality and lived experience, were ultimately non-objective expressions of free will, intuition, and "the soul." Such art—purely abstract—not only embodied Bergson's natural and regenerative life force, known as *élan vital*, but helped perpetuate that energy in viewers, leading eventually (at least in theory) to a society where the harmony inherent in nature would be more prevalent among humans.

Whatever claims *avant-guerre* artists made for their work as socially regenerative (and such claims were numerous and sincere, as this book repeatedly shows), art by itself rarely has the transformative, let alone the revolutionary, power its artists may hope for. Leighen calls this the "failure of modernism, at least as politics" (p. 58). She reminds us of it at several points in her text, in order to emphasize "the absorptive capacities of the dominant culture" (p. 58) against which these anarchist artists fought, rather than to devalue or invalidate their political motives. Yet the fact remains that their modernist styles, with few exceptions, were freely-chosen signs of political engagement, not self-centered forms of aesthetic innovation, as historians too often tend to see them.

The Liberation of Painting is indispensable for anyone interested in the inter-relatedness of art and politics during the late modern era. Leighen's commitment to the subject is as impressive as the conviction of her argument and the depth of her sources. Her confident writing style, free of jargon and entirely accessible, also makes for thoroughly enjoyable reading.

NOTES

[1] Notable exceptions are Mark Antliff's *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Patricia Leighton's *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897-1914* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[2] Book-length studies include Joan Halperin's *Félix Fénéon: Aesthete and Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989); Eugenia Herbert's *The Artist and Social Reform: France and Belgium, 1885-1898* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1961); John Hutton's *Neo-Impressionism and the Search for Solid Ground*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994); my *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Richard Sonn's *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), and Martha Ward's *Pissarro, Neo-Impressionism, and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Robyn Roslak
University of Minnesota, Duluth
rroslak@d.umn.edu

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172