

H-France Review Vol. 17 (December 2017), No. 239

Ewa Lajer-Burcharth and Elizabeth M. Rudy, eds., *Drawing: The Invention of a Modern Medium*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museums, 2017. 299 pp. Catalogue, figures, notes, and bibliography. \$20 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781891771712.

Review by Cheryl K. Snay, Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame.

Drawing: The Invention of a Modern Medium is a catalogue written for an exhibition of the same name that was on view at Harvard Art Museums January 21st through May 7th, 2017, and co-organized by Professor of Art History Ewa Lajer-Burcharth and Associate Curator of Prints Elizabeth M. Rudy. The catalogue, exhibition, and a related website (the latter two not reviewed here) were the result of a two-semester study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century (mostly) French drawings carried out in the fall of 2015 and spring of 2016 by art history graduate students, led by Lajer-Burcharth and Rudy.

The beauty of university art museums, which is on full display in *Drawing: The Invention of a Modern Medium*, is the depth of collaboration and engagement among various constituencies that they foster and the degree of theoretical and methodological innovation and experimentation they can undertake. Liberated from the need to be popular—to get feet through the door—university museums have the opportunity to be bold and experimental in their approaches to materials that have been the subject of much study in the past.

In her introductory essay, Lajer-Burcharth outlines the project and gives its parameters. She starts from the “basic” premise that drawing is a pedagogical tool (p. 7). After summarizing the history of drawing, she and her students perceive a shift in the practice and understanding of the medium in eighteenth-century France where, they argue, it became a liberal art, rather than a mechanical art, and was intellectual and conceptual, rather than mimetic (p. 14). Further, an artist’s individuality manifested itself in his or her drawing; for these writers, the very collectability of individuality in the form of drawings is evidence of the emergence of the category of the “modern.”

Eschewing conventional methods of organization based on chronology, style, or “oeuvre-oriented format” (which I take to mean biographical monographs [p.12]), the editors devised a conceptual framework based on three components: medium, discourse, and object. These main categories are more or less successfully subdivided into narrower, more precise ideas, such as surface, line, color, etc. Their laudable objective in creating this “unorthodox,” “non-linear,” and “discontinuous” structure is to “demonstrate the role of the object not as an illustration of history but as a means of reimagining it” (p. 28). Lajer-Burcharth wisely recognizes the limits of this theoretical proposition, characterizing the structure of the exhibition and catalogue as a “constellation” or “open-ended map” that is neither self-sufficient nor comprehensive (p. 34). Readers looking for concrete conclusions about specific objects will be disappointed.

Rudy’s essay, “Betwixt and Between: Drawings Related to Prints in the Harvard Art Museums,” addresses the complex relationships between drawings and prints. The first two subdivisions of her essay are straightforward and obvious. She opens by discussing drawings made in preparation for prints,

particularly reproductive prints, and the historical bias that privileged the drawing over the resulting print (p. 45). Next, she addresses drawings that were made after prints, such as Edgar Degas's tracing of Raimondi's print after Raphael as an academic exercise (p. 50). Things get interesting in her final section where she broaches the very rich topic of "drawings as prints/prints as drawings." Here, she describes new printmaking techniques developed in the eighteenth century to replicate the character of a drawing, for example, crayon or pastel manner (pp. 56-57). She points out etching's and lithography's similarities to drawing in the kind of mechanical facility they afford the artist.[1] Rudy introduces to readers the unfamiliar technique of gillotage invented in the nineteenth century to help translate drawings into prints as part of a photomechanical process (p. 58).

The discussion of counterproofs, however, gets a bit muddled. Rudy begins simply enough by introducing the subject of counterproofs of drawings, a prime example of which is included in the catalogue. She goes on to juxtapose counterproofs of drawings with counterproofs made by printmakers, claiming, "counterproofs are known to be ubiquitous to the domain of drawings *but are incorrectly assumed to be rare occurrences in the realm of prints*" (p. 59, emphasis added). She then cites a 2004 article by Marie-Christine Seigneur, "On Counterproofs," in *Print Quarterly*, where the author states that "counterproofs have been created by printmakers throughout the centuries.... Counterproofs of prints by or after many Old Masters are recorded, presenting a large variety of techniques, styles and subjects." [2] It is unclear to this reader what the origins are of the assertion that anyone considers counterproofs of prints rare, and her citation contradicts the point. Rudy returns to firmer ground when she observes that artists sometimes drew over or added color by hand to counterproofs of prints in order to transform them into drawings.

Rudy adds transfer lithography and monotypes to the list of "co-minglings" between prints and drawings. She could have gone even further in this analysis by including cliché-verre, a hybrid technique of making multiple images that combines the facility of drawing with the mechanics of photography and printmaking by making marks on a prepared glass plate subsequently placed on top of chemically treated paper and then exposing it to light. By examining the dialogue between prints and drawings and revealing how interconnected they were (and continue to be), Rudy rightly underscores the futility of attempting to segregate the arts into neat classifications (p. 61). Art is messy. Thinking about it is even messier.

Following these introductory essays are three sections containing pieces by graduate students who enrolled in seminars over two semesters. Students selected and researched drawings from the Harvard Art Museums' enviable collection, and here they artfully weave them into succinct, erudite tracts rather than catalogue entries in the conventional sense. The first section, dedicated to "Medium," which Lajer-Burcharth earlier defined as "the conjunction of materials and techniques with the historically specific conventions that govern their use in drawing" (p. 28), contains essays on the subcategories of surface, line, touch, stain, and color. Ashley Hannebrink sets the program off to a strong start in "Surface" by focusing on paper and the "active" role it plays in the artist's composition and in the spectator's understanding of it (p. 68). Directing readers' attention to the papers' textures, weights, and colors emphasizes that it is more than just a "support" for the marks that sit on top of it. In the second essay, Samuel Ewing regards line as the most basic aspect of drawing—an extension of the body of the artist recording movement and time—that brings form into being (p. 78). The essays on "Touch" and "Stain" are of a different order from those on surface, line, and color. The authors' interpretations of these categories are far more subjective and psychological than the others. It is unclear if by touch, the author is referring to an artist's handling of material, to spectators' perception of the actual texture of the medium, or the implied texture of the object being depicted. Similarly, Laura Kenner's treatment of "Stain" is metaphorical. She alludes to "bruises," "spillage," and the wet mediums, such as ink wash and watercolor, "mimicking bodily fluids, punctures, and wounds," in the descriptions of drawings under her purview. Color is addressed separately from stain, and Marina Molarsky-Beck rehearses a useful historiography of its theory in art invoking Charles Le Brun and Roger de Piles (p. 108). Had Cézanne's *Forest Interior* addressed in the essay on touch been included instead in the essay on color, the argument that drawing is a "modern" medium might have

been reinforced. The avant-garde artist is quoted: “Drawing and color are not separate...in the process of painting, one draws.”[3] *Forest Interior* illustrates that idea precisely.

With twelve essays, not all of which fit comfortably together, the section on “Discourse” is unwieldy and would have profited from some judicious editing. In this section, Lajer-Burcharth and her students “explore some of the ideas generated by, or associated with, drawing but also the ways in which drawings themselves may be seen to ‘think’” (p. 28). Some of the essays gathered here, for example, “Albums and Sketchbooks” and “Body: Pose and Gesture,” are intuitive in the context of the topic of discourse. In the latter essay, Trent Barnes describes a Pissarro sketch of two female figures as being “deprived” of facial features, denying them any “potential for communicative expression” (p. 206). Isn’t that rejection of mimesis precisely what makes a drawing “modern”? Barnes continues his analysis and recognizes that it is the bodies of the peasants themselves, the figures and how they are composed and presented, that convey Pissarro’s meaning. Later, in discussing William Blake’s *Fallen Angels* (ca. 1793), Barnes sums up the renaissance principle that became enshrined in art academies in Europe and the New World: “The bodies become devices for narration” (p. 208). Other essays, such as “Blindness and Vision,” “Eros,” and “Violence,” are conceptual, one might even say poetic.

The writers complete the circle in the last section, “Object,” which elaborates on the premise articulated at the outset: drawing is a pedagogical tool. Here the authors examine the multiple functions of drawing, subdividing the section into “Instruction,” “Reproduction,” “Architecture and Design,” and “Knowledge” (p. 33). As a very specific and concrete area to which instruction, reproduction, and knowledge can be applied, “Architecture and Design” seems here, again, to be of a different order. In inserting it before “Knowledge,” the authors seem to be suggesting that it is an area of drawing that *causes or produces* knowledge—that it is a part of the process of creating knowledge—rather than being an effect of the combination of the other three subcategories.

The catalogue is a product of an academic exercise at one of the preeminent universities in the country. Jointly directed by a renowned professor with expertise in eighteenth-century French art and an accomplished museum curator of prints in tandem with a group of promising graduate students,[4] it is an admirable and worthwhile effort to push the theoretical boundaries of interpreting drawings. With its theoretical grounding and focus, it is aimed squarely and unapologetically at a scholarly audience, and it hits its mark. The authors’ endeavor to liberate the objects from chronology and style is refreshing, provocative, and inspiring. Having said that, the writing—equal parts art history and creative writing—is sometimes labored and overwrought. I occasionally wondered whether these students actually liked drawings.

In the spirit of the open-endedness they embrace, one wonders what the end result might have looked like had a conservator been included in the mix. A conservator may have spared the students, too, from certain lapses, such as discrepancies between the descriptions of a drawing’s medium in the essay and the catalogue tombstones (the object’s identification information) in the back of the book.[5] I wonder, too, if the writers had ever taken a drawing class or experimented with the various media they were studying. How might such an experience have informed their essays? Did they have an opportunity to visit other museums and study drawings related to their own subjects? Finally, the selection of drawings appears arbitrary, as does their placement in certain categories. Despite the group’s location of the invention of a modern medium in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France,[6] British drawings inexplicably pop up along the way. Géricault’s *Study for the Start of the Race of the Barberi Horses*, found in the essay on “Time,” could fit just as easily in the discussions on “Line,” “Gesture,” or “Touch.” How might reshuffling the drawings into different categories have changed the overall complexion of the project? In this respect, the program stays true to its nature, described in the introduction as an “open-ended map.”

The tombstones in the back of the book accompanied by the thumbnails would have benefited from attaching a bibliography for each work, so that readers interested in conventional analyses could consult

that scholarship on their own. An index would have also made navigating the text easier. The addition of more comparative illustrations referenced in the texts would have made the arguments easier to follow. [7] The catalogue is nevertheless richly illustrated with good color reproductions (no small feat for drawings where the nuances of tone and texture frequently get lost). The cover of the catalogue is curiously designed with a Toulouse-Lautrec drawing partially obscuring the main title, *Drawing*. The book is otherwise beautifully laid out and legible and would be a welcome addition to any drawing aficionado's bookshelf.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "Drawing: Medium, Discourse, Object"

Elizabeth M. Rudy, "Betwixt and Between: Drawings Related to Prints in the Harvard Art Museums"

Ashley Hannebrink, "Surface"

Samuel Ewing, "Line"

Laura Kenner, "Touch"

Laura Kenner, "Stain"

Marina Molarsky-Beck, "Color"

Harmon Siegel, "Idea"

Ashley Hannebrink, "Process"

David Pullins, "Albums and Sketchbooks"

Trent Barnes, "Hand"

Samuel Ewing, "Blindness and Vision"

Oliver Wunsch, "Time"

Harmon Siegel, "Memory"

Marina Molarsky-Beck, "Movement"

Sean Wehle, "Eros"

Trent Barnes, "Body: Pose and Gesture"

Sara Grandin, "Violence"

Sean Wehle, "Labor"

Sarah Mirseyedi, "Instruction"

Sarah Mirseyedi, "Reproduction"

David Pullins, "Architecture and Design"

Sarah Grandin, "Knowledge"

NOTES

[1] To these examples of cross-pollination from the Harvard Art Museums could be added an intriguing etching of Lady Jane Montagu (ca. 1816?) heavily worked over in graphite and watercolor by Ingres that appeared on the market in 2009. Nicolaas Teeuwisse, Berlin, 2009, <http://www.teeuwisse.de/catalogues/selected-paintings-drawings-viii/full-length-portrait-of-lady-jane-montagu-reclining-on-an-antique-chaise-longue.html>.

[2] Marie-Christine Seigneur, "On Counterproofs," *Print Quarterly* 21.2(June 2004): 115.

[3] As quoted in Erle Loran, *Cézanne's Compositions: Analysis of His Form with Diagrams and Photographs of His Motifs*, new edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 132.

[4] The authors claim that this type of collaboration between the academy and museums, faculty, curators, and students is "unique" (see p. 7 of the catalogue and the home page for the exhibition's website, <https://www.harvardartmuseums.org/visit/exhibitions/5114/drawing-the-invention-of-a-modern-medium>.) For those of us who work in museums, the practice is quite common. A seminar that resulted in a traveling exhibition and catalogue, *Medieval Art in America*, is how this reviewer began her curatorial career at Penn State University in 1996. At the University of Notre Dame, a professor routinely taught an Italian drawing seminar, the climax of which was a focus exhibition of the drawings and a modest catalogue produced in house.

[5] See pages 89 and 281, for example. Kenner says Courbet "covered the entirety of the surface in black charcoal" but the description in the tombstone says, "black chalk with traces of charcoal." There is a growing body of literature on the use of charcoal in the mid-nineteenth century for finished drawings. This kind of discrepancy can undermine a writer's credibility, and it is a misstep that is easy to avoid.

[6] "This transformation [of drawing's practice, status and understanding] is most fully evident in 18th-century France. While new attitudes toward draftsmanship appeared at the time elsewhere, most notably in Britain, it was in France that drawing was most significantly, and most influentially, repositioned and reconceptualized" (p. 14).

[7] For example, on p. 79, Ewing opens his essay on line with a Flaxman drawing referencing the final engraved image, but does not provide an illustration for it. Readers must rely on Ewing's description and comparison of it.

Cheryl K. Snay
Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame
Cheryl.K.Snay.1@nd.edu

Copyright © 2017 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 republication 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