
H-France Review Vol. 17 (February 2017), No. 32

Lee Hendrix, ed., *Noir: The Romance of Black in Nineteenth-Century French Drawings and Prints*. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2016. viii + 174 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-6060-6482-5.

Review by Kathryn Brown, Loughborough University.

Nineteenth-century French art and culture have often been associated with luminosity. From Stéphane Mallarmé's praise of Berthe Morisot's "bright, iridescent paintings," to the transformation of living environments through the introduction of electric lighting, and the intellectual clarity prized by realist fiction, French audiences reveled in the imaginative and analytical possibilities afforded by light.[1] Forming a counterpart to the body of scholarship that has emerged in response to this theme, museums have also turned their attention to nineteenth-century art's exploitation of the material and symbolic potential of shadows, gloom, and obscurity.[2]

One of the latest contributions to this probing of the limits of visibility is the catalogue edited by Lee Hendrix to accompany an exhibition of prints and drawings that took place at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles from February 9 to May 15, 2016. In a volume that includes nine essays and over 100 high quality images, the editor and contributors examine the technical development and use of "black media" in the nineteenth century. With their focus on the expressive possibilities of charcoal, conté crayon, and black chalk, and discussion of overlaps between drawing and printmaking, the essays are a welcome addition to studies in this field. They also provide invaluable analyses of the materials and techniques used to produce "noir" drawings in the nineteenth century.

Cynthia Burlingham's opening essay examines developments in the nineteenth-century French print market. While her discussion of debates about the originality and reproducibility of prints will be familiar to specialists in the field, her essay provides an important background context for the ensuing discussion of experiments with "black media." The essay examines the popularity of etching and the emergence of lithography (including transfer lithography) and monoprinting, but also surveys experiments in lesser known media such as *cliché verre* ("glass negative") and *gillotage* (a process that turned a lithographic plate into a relief block that was compatible with blocks of type and, therefore, well suited to the simultaneous printing of text and images).

In the following suite of five essays, Lee Hendrix fleshes out ideas that shaped artists' attraction to the use and expressive possibilities of dark media. Francisco de Goya is identified as a key figure in this history, the nocturnal worlds of his *Los caprichos* and *Los proverbios* serving as major reference points for French Romantic artists. The second major figure was Rembrandt van Rijn, a "prophet of creative printmaking" (p. 31) whose dramatic use of chiaroscuro not only gave impetus to the etching revival of the 1860s, but also stimulated experiments with charcoal later in the century. Odilon Redon's *noirs* (charcoal drawings) of the 1870s and 1880s come to epitomize, for Hendrix, "the essence of black" (p. 68) within this genealogy. Their fantastical subject-matter, chromatic qualities, and innovative combination

of charcoal and fixative both stretched the expressive potential of the medium and shaped the works' subject matter.

Among the most interesting ideas explored by Hendrix is the cross-pollination of drawing and printmaking and, more importantly, the blurring of distinctions between categories such as “avant-garde” and “conservative” in experimentation with “black media.” Hendrix points out that the etching revival occurred at a time when charcoal drawing gained currency in the curriculum reforms of the *École des beaux-arts* in Paris. With the benefit of improvements in fixatives that made charcoal marks permanent on the page, *fusain* became an accepted medium for presentation drawings and created a new cadre of specialists in the field: *fusainistes*. Hendrix observes that many artists were both etchers and *fusainistes* and that this encouraged a “crossover aesthetic” (p. 31) in styles of “graphic thinking” (p. 2). She notes further that *fusainistes* were typically landscapists and that the works they produced were often large-scale, highly finished pieces (p. 33). While works on paper by artists such as Auguste Allongé, Maxime Lalanne, and Adolphe Appian may appear conservative in the context of narratives of modernism, they are, Hendrix shows, both innovative and adventurous in their manipulation of lighting effects, use of paper to create different tones, and employment of fixatives to achieve textural range. This expansive view of the ways in which innovations in “black media” permeated different artistic circles is a welcome approach and dismantles familiar oppositions that have underpinned many art historical discussions of printmaking and drawing.

The choice and use of paper is rightly identified as central to the expressive potential of “black media,” particularly in works that employ charcoal or chalk. In a chapter devoted to realism, Hendrix examines techniques used to support or confound naturalistic subject-matter in works by Gustave Courbet, François Bonvin, and Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret, among others. While stark visual contrasts of light and shade coupled with thick deposits of chalk on the page could effectively invoke the realities of working-class life, prominent watermarks intrude on the visual fiction and disrupt the unity of the depicted space. Artists are shown to have exploited the weave of the paper in different ways, blending charcoal, crayon, or chalk into its fibers, exploiting its “pits” to generate textures, and scratching areas of their compositions to generate highlights from the white pigment of the underlying page. In each case, the “support” adds to the compositional complexity of the finished work and is as important as the marks on its surface.

These and other technical aspects of “black drawing media” are discussed in further detail by Michelle Sullivan and Nancy Yocco in four case studies. Focusing on works by Maxime Lalanne, Odilon Redon, Georges Seurat, and Rodolphe Bresdin, Sullivan and Yocco offer a detailed view of the diverse techniques by which tonal effects were created on paper. Their study is complemented by an essay on charcoal drawing materials and techniques by Timothy David Mayhew. Tracing the medium's development from the use of charred wood in ancient Egypt to the interwoven historical, political and technological events that secured its popularity in the nineteenth century, Mayhew provides a compelling account of the emergence of charcoal as an independent and versatile means of artistic mark-making. His essay includes an important technical discussion of various holders, stumps, brushes, cloths, and scrapers that were used to spread, blend, lift, or lighten the medium to create different effects. Sullivan and Yocco round out the discussion with an illustrated glossary of materials and techniques used in *noir* drawings. Helpfully, this includes detailed photographs of the marks produced by different media, types of paper, and effects created by the tools discussed in Mayhew's essay.

There are times when one wishes the authors had been given an opportunity to press their analyses further. Degas's printmaking—particularly in monotype—is passed over quickly, and it would have been interesting to pursue the relationship between printmaking and drawing beyond a shared exploration of tonality in the two media. Consideration of Stephen Bann's recent exploration of the relations between different print media in the nineteenth century would have deepened the inter-medial focus pursued in the catalogue.^[3] Hendrix also acknowledges that a discussion of photography is

missing from the analysis, a feature of the book that was necessitated by the tight focus of the exhibition itself.

Nevertheless, the essays and images in this catalogue show how nineteenth-century French artists constantly sought to innovate in the twinned media of dark field drawing and printmaking in order to pursue new subjects and reinvent familiar genres. The authors draw together artists who are often discussed separately from each other and thereby chart a new course through a complex and varied visual terrain. Whether at the service of objective realism or the creation of fantastic dreamworlds, “black media” are seen to have propelled some of the most innovative visions and technical accomplishments of the nineteenth century.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Lee Hendrix, “Introduction”

Cynthia Burlingham, “Revivals and Modernity: The Printed Image in Nineteenth-Century France”

Lee Hendrix, “Prelude: Dark Romanticism”

Lee Hendrix, “Landscape, Charcoal, and the Etching Revival”

Lee Hendrix, “Realism”

Lee Hendrix, “Fantasy and Dreams”

Lee Hendrix, “The Optics of Shadow”

Michelle Sullivan and Nancy Yocco, “Diversity and Complexity of Black Drawing Media: Four Case Studies”

Timothy David Mayhew, “*Dessin au fusain*: Nineteenth-Century French Charcoal Drawing Materials and Techniques”

Michelle Sullivan and Nancy Yocco, “A Closer Look: An Illustrated Glossary of Materials and Techniques Used in Nineteenth-Century *Noir* Drawings”

NOTES

[1] Stéphane Mallarmé, “Berthe Morisot,” *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II, ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 2003), p. 147; *Electric Paris*, February 17–April 21, 2013, Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, curated by S. Hollis Clayson and coordinated by Sarah Lees. See also *Lucidity: Essays in Honour of Alison Finch*, ed. Ian James and Emma Wilson (Oxford: Legenda, 2016).

[2] Peter Parshall, et al., *The Darker Side of Light: Arts of Privacy, 1850–1900* (Washington: National Gallery of Art in association with Lund Humphries, Surrey, 2009); Jodi Hauptmann, ed., *Degas: A Strange New Beauty* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2016).

[3] Stephen Bann, *Distinguished Images: Prints and the Visual Economy in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

Kathryn Brown
Loughborough University

k.j.brown@lboro.ac.uk

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 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