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Marc Gotlieb, *The Deaths of Henri Regnault*. Chicago, Ill. and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016. xiv + 298. Figures, notes, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780226276045.

Review by John P. Lambertson, Washington and Jefferson College.

Marc Gotlieb begins his study of the painter Henri Regnault by discussing a drawing by the artist's closest friend. The sketch depicts muddy tracks in a snow-covered road that recedes perspectively on the left into an unpopulated distance, balanced in the right middle ground by a blasted and splintered tree. Regnault died here, at Buzenval, on January 19th, 1871, voluntarily fighting in the National Guard against the Prussians. He quickly became a French national hero after the Franco-Prussian War. At the time of his tragic death, many contemporaries saw the twenty-seven-year-old as an emerging *chef d'école* and a reformer of French painting. Gotlieb cleverly employs the drawing as a double metaphor for his project—the death of Regnault's promising career and the death of his reputation after 1914.

Gotlieb's book, in fact, is the first volume published on the academic painter Regnault since 1913, and the artist remains relatively unknown today, except among nineteenth-century art historians, who began about forty years ago to reevaluate the other art of the age of impressionism. We classify this painting today as "official," "salon," or "academic" art. These reevaluations tended to focus on the life and work of forgotten artists, and the opening of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris in 1986 offered the public the first significant opportunity to examine these works. Unlike many of those early reevaluations, Gotlieb employs a variety of methodological approaches to produce a significant interpretive work, addressing Regnault's career, the art world of the Second Empire, and the making of public memory. He constructs his study in two interrelated parts, focusing first on his art in four thematic chapters and then on his posthumous legend in three chapters.

A truly astonishing aspect of Regnault's career is that he made his significant reputation entirely with student work after winning the four-year Rome Prize in 1866. Gotlieb introduces the transgressive nature of Regnault's studies as well as his art in his first chapter and underscores that the curricular demands of the Rome Prize regulations, as well as the art of the past, posed particular challenges for Regnault. The regulations obliged laureates to send work to Paris each year, a system of *envois*, to exhibit their development, and these academic exercises became increasingly complex, culminating in what was essentially an original history painting on a sacred, antique, or mythological subject. In the first year, the requirement was an *académie*, a nude figure study. Regnault immediately challenged the guidelines and sent a

canvas, *Automedon with the Horses of Achilles*, which was vastly larger than the typical figure study and broke the rules by adding two life-size horses. The painting was more about the power of the animals than the figure, and Regnault himself described Automedon as running “toward the spectator, a horse in each hand” (p. 20). Biographers and the artist himself positioned his work as a romantic rejection of France’s neoclassical heritage, which helps Gotlieb conclude that the painter “embraced a conception of painting that was violent, equine, coloristic, and thanks to the native, primordial character of his naturalism, by definition contemporary” (p. 24). Naturalism also seemed a solution to his indifference to the Italian old masters and his fear of copying Michelangelo. He turned first, as others before him, to modern Italian figure types and traveled to Madrid to study Spanish painting.

Artistic renewal led Regnault to travel beyond Spain to Morocco, “the land of the sun,” and in his second chapter, “The Orientalist Sublime,” Gotlieb explains this rejuvenation as “on the one hand naturalist and on the other sublime” (p. 41). Artists who traveled to North Africa lived Orientalist stereotypes as their own, but also employed them against studio routines, particularly the region’s powerful sun. The naturalist painter experienced brilliant North African light as a perceptual overload, an encounter with the sublime, and according to Gotlieb, this sun became a new master “severed from tradition and hence without its disabling authority” (p. 53). Gotlieb positions Regnault in a long line of painters of brilliant illumination, including the Orientalists Eugène Fromentin and Gustave Guillaumet, and relates his project to Claude Monet. Unlike these artists, however, Regnault did not pull back in face of the sun’s sublimity, and “put all the resources of his art in the service of an immersive dream that only grew stranger as he gave himself over to his quest [to paint light]...” (p. 58). Regnault’s watercolors of the Alhambra in Spain, such as *The Court of the Ambassadors*, best embody his experience of the sublime; weaving Regnault’s voice and those of his contemporaries into his analysis, Gotlieb underscores the vertiginous contrast of ground and air, of dark and light, and most importantly, intense color-absent shadow, and sun-bleached walls in these images.

The painting *Salome* transformed Regnault from an up-and-coming talent into a celebrity at the Salon of 1870. The canvas was essentially a portrait of a sensuous and seductive woman in a low-cut top and diaphanous skirt holding a knife and a charger. As soon as the picture became public, however, cultural forces expanded its meanings: it was now a touchstone for gossip about the artist’s violent temperament and love life, embodied the viewer’s as well as Salome’s desire, revealed the artistic power of a yellow background, personified a generational challenge to academic art, and became the visual model for Salome in theater, poetry, and fiction. Regnault’s model, a Roman girl called Maria Latini, remained unnamed for decades, which complicated these meanings and multiplied the painter’s celebrity. Shortly after the Salon, Adèle Cassin, a wealthy and famous courtesan, acquired *Salome* for her lavish home near the Place de l’Étoile, placing the image of seduction in the hands of a seductress. Critics described the yellow dress on gold background, painted without shadow, as visually dazzling as an electric flash, and Gotlieb compares the painter’s approach to shadow and color to Edouard Manet and the Impressionists. Gotlieb argues that behind this visual overload was “seduction that treated such stimulation as feminine and fatal” (p. 98) and concludes, “*Salome* invites us to applaud her performance, to acknowledge our complicity, and to serve as her victim” (p. 103).

Regnault died before he painted his last *envoi*, a colossal canvas projected at thirty-three feet wide, on the Muslim conquest of Spain, which Gotlieb aptly describes as “a massively

overscaled proxy for his own struggle with tradition's authority" (p. 105). Regnault's life-size painting, *Execution without Judgment under the Kings of Morocco* suggests, however, some of the same interests as his plan for the conquest of Spain: in Regnault's words, the elegance and cruelty of Arab civilization. Here, an executioner, wiping off his sword, stands in a beautiful arabesque-filled interior next to a headless corpse and two bloody steps above a severed head. Gotlieb mobilizes Delacroix's *The Execution of the Doge Marino Faliero* (1826) as a model for Regnault's painting of Orientalist decor and violence; he also points out that Delacroix took a medium-specific approach to painting blood in his watercolors, dripping red drops on a moistened paper to allow watercolor to act like blood. Regnault employed a similar method when painting blood in oil by pouring and splattering the paint on the canvas, which seems to actually flow down the steps like blood. Regnault's blood activates the elegant roses and brilliant reds in the interior, as it simultaneously horrifies audiences. The red also finds its complement in greens, particularly in the decapitated head, which stares back at his executioner and bears the same features. This leads Gotlieb to conclude that the victim witnesses his own execution, and "thanks to this [facial] doubling, [takes] pleasure in exactly that prospect" (p. 123).

Gotlieb begins the second part of his book by presenting an account of Regnault's death as well as how the story of his death was communicated. He weaves the facts of the story with "a broader performative poetics of recollection that saw Regnault's friends and acquaintances map his itinerary from Buzenval to the tomb" (pp. 128-129). The painter's voluntary enlistment in the National Guard, military life, move to the front, engagement in battle, death, the search for his body, and his funeral seemed pushed by fate and produced memorable elements of his patriotic myth. For instance, Gotlieb quotes Regnault's line reportedly spoken just after the retreat order and before his death as a testimony to his patriotism: "I still have a few cartridges left—I am going to fire them" (p. 139). Retreat, shifting lines, and four thousand French casualties meant it was six long days before friends and family retrieved Regnault's body. Last sightings and remembrances of when and where one first heard the news of Regnault's death proliferated, which Gotlieb relates to flashbulb memory theory, and argues that these recollections were so widespread that they materialized as public memory. Cultural and religious rituals immediately after his death only amplified his legend. Once Regnault's body was found, his friend the sculptor Louis-Ernest Barrias made a mold of his face. This death mask showed a bullet hole in his temple—one writer called it "a hole through which genius made her escape"—and a broken nose caused by his fall (p. 157). Casts as well as various print versions of the mask circulated widely. His body lay in state for two days at the *École de médecine*, and contemporaries described his funeral as a state ritual. Music, orations, and poetry also celebrated him during and immediately after the service.

In the first decades of the Third Republic, Regnault materialized as a figure of national patriotic devotion, and Gotlieb analyzes monuments erected in his honor, describes how his image circulated, and interprets their place in French culture and politics. Gotlieb's approach emphasizes how Regnault's legend coalesced in the public mind, focusing on its "artistic, material, and performative specificity" (p. 172). Monuments celebrated both his patriotic sacrifice and artistic achievement and came in a variety of widely circulated busts, an obelisk crowned by his bust at Buzenval unveiled in 1872, and a lavish memorial at the *École des Beaux-Arts* dedicated in 1876. The monument at the *École* was significant for the creation of his legend, as Gotlieb skillfully reveals, and although initiated by friends and family, gained

donations from such public figures as government ministers and the prefect of police. The monument's two main sculptural elements comprised a bust of Regnault wearing a guardsman's coat by Charles Degeorge and a classicized image of *Youth* mourning the soldier and artist, sometimes also read as his fiancée, by Henri Chapu. The monument and its parts became commodified and ritualized; images of Chapu's *Youth*, for instance, could be ordered in bronze in five sizes, and Rome prizewinners customarily visited the monument, leaving a crown wrapped in black crepe, before leaving for Italy. Other images of and inspired by Regnault's heroic and selfless patriotism proliferated during the Third Republic: prints and paintings celebrating his defiance and self-sacrifice, sculptures in and on the reconstructed Hôtel de Ville in Paris. Regnault's image appeared in public schools; he became a role model in children's literature and in patriotic texts for boys. And Regnault's iconicity was ripe for appropriation by Paul Déroulède and his revanchist and populist League of Patriots. Déroulède co-opted Regnault's legend and image in the 1880s for his militant nationalist politics and even provoked government officials with a stunt at the École's memorial to Regnault during the unofficial visit to the French capital in 1891 of Victoria, widow of German Emperor Frederick III who participated in the siege of Paris.

Despite Regnault's celebrity in the 1870s and 1880s, he seemed nearly forgotten at the dawn of the twentieth century, and in his last chapter, Gotlieb explores the rise and fall of Regnault's reputation, a kind of proxy for the fate of academic art. Within two years of the painter's death, his art seemed to be everywhere: the Luxembourg Museum acquired two important large works, including *Execution without Judgment*; his watercolors appeared to rave reviews in the annual exhibition of the Cercle de l'union de l'art on the Place Vendôme; a wildly successful retrospective opened at the École; and his drawings, paintings, and watercolors sold well. The tipping point for his reputation came as early as 1878 with critical reactions to his work exhibited at the Exposition Universelle. By the mid-1880s, his *Execution without Judgment* went into storage at the Louvre, and his artistic status transformed from a painter who could have revitalized French painting to a realist *manqué*. As Regnault's reputation as an artistic innovator waned in France, it continued to gain traction in the United States, and the acquisition of his *Automadon* became a cause célèbre for the students of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts Museum School as a way to challenge their training in neo-classical figure painting. *Salome* itself went up for sale in 1912, and Gottlieb concludes his book with a fascinating discussion of the initial public pressure for the Louvre to buy the painting, the eventual and overwhelmingly harsh criticism of the picture, and anti-Semitic attacks on the art dealer, Arthur Meyer, selling the canvas.

Gotlieb skillfully positions Regnault as a central artistic and cultural figure in France during his short life and after his death. In contrast to the orthodox dichotomy between academic and modernist, the author reveals that Regnault was at once a kind of rebel inside the academic system seeking to revitalize tradition and an artist who had aesthetic interests in common with Manet, Monet, and progressive painters of the 1860s and 1870s. In fact, the relationship between Regnault's interests and those of progressive painters deserves to be explored in more detail. Gotlieb also expands the discourse on Orientalism by revealing that Regnault revitalized his painting by employing Orientalist stereotypes about North African light. Gotlieb's consideration of Regnault's posthumous reputation, however, is the most significant contribution of the book for this reader; the author skillfully reveals how his artistic achievement and patriotic sacrifice became legend, and presents a fascinating window on art

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and cultural politics in the early decades of the Third Republic through the lens of Regnault and his public but brief legacy.

Gotlieb is particularly good at visual analysis of some paintings, like *Execution without Judgment*, especially his discussion of color and the application of paint to emulate blood. At times, however, he stretches his visual analysis to support an argument; for instance, he questions if *Salome* actually looks at the viewer, despite physical evidence in the painting and ample critical reactions to her direct stare. The book's reproductions are excellent, but there are no figure numbers in the text referring to the images, rendering visual arguments elusive. Gotlieb's discursive style can also be hard to follow; for example, he narrates Regnault's friend Georges Clairin's memories of the artist's last afternoon and only two pages later reveals how the account is factually flawed. Finally, the book suffers from the lack of a bibliography. Despite these criticisms, Gotlieb imparts impressive insights on the end of academic art and the creation of a mythic national hero by the late 1870s, an artistic and cultural era soon replaced by modernism and new modes of memorialization, like the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, for an age of total war.

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