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Jana Wijnsouw. *National Identity and Nineteenth-Century Franco-Belgian Sculpture*. New York: Routledge, 2018. x + 282 pp. Series: Routledge Research in Art History. 65 b/w illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$155 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781138712515; \$49.46 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781315200132

Review by Emily C. Burns, Auburn University.

Jana Wijnsouw's volume joins a spate of art historical scholarship investigating the complex relationships between national identity and art, or as Anthony D. Smith has described it, the role of art in realizing the nation.^[1] Because of its founding as a modern nation state in 1830, Belgium offers a compelling case study to interrogate ambitions to build a national art school, relationships between art criticism and art production, and how stereotypes and presumptions of national character informed art making and reception. As part of the hyper-nationalist discourse of the fin-de-siècle, Wijnsouw traces the vicissitudes of the links between constructions of the nation and iconography, artists' identities, international training, critical assessment, and stylistic choices. The layers of individual, regional, national, and international identity surface through the examples, which reveal competing Flemish, Walloon, French, and/or Belgian affinities. Wijnsouw asks the probing questions: "what elements—subject matter, composition, sculptor, style, reception—contribute to the creation of a 'national sculpture'? And which sculptures, common characteristics, and sculptors can therefore be considered truly 'national,' and why?" (p. 2). Well-researched and documented from primary and secondary sources, the book builds a framework for considering the production of public sculpture in Belgium. The book also joins a growing body of literature on nineteenth-century sculpture in the context of international exchange.^[2]

The volume covers the years from 1830-1916, from the national founding of Belgium, at which time there was demonstrably no Belgian sculpture school, to the *Belgian Art in Exile* exhibition in London in 1916, at which a national school of sculpture was assumed (p. 3). The structure divides units into discrete chronological trends between 1830-50, 1850-80, 1880-95, and 1895-1916. These units are further subdivided by theme, covering in each politics, art education, exhibition spaces, and public commissions. This results in an encyclopedic breadth of coverage of artists, critics, commentaries, and changes to the academic and exhibition systems in Belgium as salons begin to give way to a broadening of exhibition venues created by burgeoning artists' societies (pp. 159-165). Reading art as a statement of national identity shifts as well, across these periods, from being centered on the iconography within the sculptures, to the artists' origins, to internationally framed claims of a national style with undergirding local identities, to a retrenchment into the nation on the eve of World War I. As such, this book

provides vital background for other scholars engaging with Belgian sculpture and the history of national identity and art making.

At the same time, by dividing the work so stringently into these sub-topics, the author often makes only cursory connections across the time periods and across these themes. Thus the richness and overlap of these discourses is often skirted, and left to the reader alone to try to build connections. The “Visual Table of Contents” (p. v) offers summaries of these categories, yet reads as a hasty outline that further obscures the issues. Breadth sacrifices argument and the possibility for more exploratory, deeply analyzed case studies that would draw together the inevitably intertwined politics, education, exhibition practice, and commissions that the author parses into a unified discourse that not only shaped visual representation, but one that can likely be seen intersected through the materiality of these examples. Visual analysis is often overlooked in favor of offering documents of commissions, critical reception, and conditions of display. Artistic styles—romanticism, neoclassicism, Art Nouveau, etc.—appear as monikers in the text, but are rarely interrogated fully and in a nuanced way that is connected with social discourse through the illustrated examples (p. 45, 51). Fascinating and rich examples—such as ivory sculptures commissioned in the Belgian colonialist context—are unillustrated and discussion on them relegated to only a few pages (pp. 189-191). A more compelling structure for this project might have framed single-object or single-artist studies for each chapter that would have enabled the author to more fully build connection between contexts, discourses, and aesthetics around objects such as these.

The introduction addresses the main interdisciplinary literature on national identity and its relationship with art making as “a compendium both containing and engendering national identity” (p. 12), but leaves some key questions unaddressed. One unresolved question in the framing is the author’s reasoning for defining the sculpture discussed in the book as “Franco-Belgian.” The author notes Belgian artists’ and critics’ oft-fraught relationship with French art and culture, which due to proximity, partially shared language, and some overlapping cultural attributes, overshadowed and shaped Belgian projections of its own character. Is the title because her text “elaborates on the role and influence of Belgian sculptors abroad, mainly in France” (p. 3) where the Paris art scene made a strong impact? Or based on the call in the period for a “Belgian-French’ [language]-a full-fledged equivalent, independent from the language spoken in France” (p. 180)? Or that even Belgian-produced objects are shaped by French discourse as they were “confronted with prejudice of their supposed indebtedness to French examples” (p. 179)? Clarity on this central question is warranted, especially given the author’s methodological lens in the politics of nationality. Furthermore, in the case studies, complexities of regional identities such as Walloon and Flemish are raised in the third and fourth sections of the book (p. 223, 225), but nowhere does Wijnsouw provide a thorough discussion of how these subcultures were built or characterized by region, history, and language. What politics shaped this resurgent regionalism? This presumed knowledge leaves the reader digging for additional details to aid in following the interpretations of the objects.

The contributions of the book lie most in its engagement with and critique of the nineteenth-century critical penchant for trying to read nationality in art. In the context of internationalism and cosmopolitanism, Wijnsouw argues that the national and international need not be incompatible categories (p. 13, 168). This analysis spurs the possibility for understanding convergence with other contexts; for instance, Wijnsouw charts the declaration of a Belgian national school of sculpture via the displays at the Paris Exposition of 1900 (p. 209, 225), where

my research has shown French critics also declared a uniquely US school of sculpture.[3] What might account for that parallel narrative? Did a discourse of national art crystalize internationally at this particular World's Fair?

Finally, the book sheds light on two key aspects of nationalism and art making. Firstly, Wijnsouw shows that both national identity and art production are dynamic, constituted, and unfixed categories that change over time (p. 2, 4). Secondly, as Wijnsouw concludes, a Belgian national school of sculpture was “mainly a constructed discourse, rather than an actual artistic reality” (p. 231). The evidence raised in the book indeed suggests that there is often a gap between the verbal and the visual in the contradictions and inconsistencies between critical claims of seeing unique national character, and the aesthetics of the sculpture produced.

NOTES

[1] Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation Made Real: Art and National Identity in Western Europe, 1600–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[2] Examples include the special issue of *Sculpture Journal* on internationalism and sculpture introduced by editors Ann Compton and Tomas Macsotay, “Introduction: national sculpture in cosmopolitan Paris,” *Sculpture Journal* 27, no. 1(2018): 7–15; and Melissa Dabakis, *A Sisterhood of Sculptors: American Artists in Nineteenth-Century Rome* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014); and Cassandra Albinson and Jo Briggs, *Dalou in England: Portraits of Womanhood, 1871–1879* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2010).

[3] Emily C. Burns, *Transnational Frontiers: the American West in France* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 89.

Emily C. Burns
Auburn University
Emily.burns@auburn.edu

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