

---

H-France Review Vol. 19 (October 2019), No. 206

Emmanuelle Brugerolles (ed). *Georges Focus: La folie d'un peintre de Louis XIV*. Exh. Cat. Palais des Beaux-Arts, Beaux-Arts de Paris, 13 October 2018–6 January 2019 (Paris: École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 2018). 447 pages. French. €49.00.

Review by Robert Wellington, Australian National University.

It is rare to find works of art from Louis XIV's France that destabilize the language of representation to the degree of the *écritures dessinées* of Georges Focus (c.1640-1708). Around 120 pages of richly-inscribed charcoal and ink drawings are practically all that remain of the oeuvre of this landscape painter, who was received as a member of the *Académie Royale de peinture et de sculpture* in 1675. Probably produced between 1693 and 1695 when he was confined to an asylum, these works loosely chronicle the artist's life through the lens of his paranoid delusions. Focus appears as narrator/interlocuter in most sheets in the foreground as an old man—time, or the personification of a river—accompanied by a wolf, while his younger self often appears again within the image marked out with a halo. While bizarre and fantastical, the *comité scientifique* for this exhibition have used these drawings to discern many aspects of the artist's life and of quotidian experience at that time. As Emanuelle Brugerolles and David Guimet note in the introduction to the catalogue: “Aujourd’hui, indiscutablement, ceux-ci peuvent être considérés comme une extraordinaire fenêtre ouverte sur la carrière de Focus, son réseau social, sa culture; plus largement, une source sans équivalent sur la vie dans les institutions qu’on ne qualifiait pas alors de “psychiatriques” et, au-delà, sur la société du XVIIe siècle; enfin et surtout, ils nous offrent un aperçu de l’existence et de la psyché de l’artiste, comme aucun autre à cette époque n’en a laissé” (p. 24).

Georges Focus is an enigma. The scant archival evidence that pertains to him provides us with the date of his reception at the *Académie*, various addresses in the 1670s and 80s, all within close proximity to the Louvre, that is to say the city's artistic center, his birthplace, Châteaudun, and that he was 67 when he died in February 1708 at *les Petites Maisons* (a hospital for the mentally ill that probably became a metonym for all such establishments). The earliest mention of Focus after his death appears in the papers of Pierre-Jean Mariette (1694-1774), published posthumously in the nineteenth century. Mariette became aware of Focus and his *écritures dessinées* sometime after 1740, mentioning: “...un recueil de dessins qu’il avoit fait dans les accès de sa folie ou parmi mille extravagances, il y avoit des morceaux de paysage dessinés d’assez bon gout [...] Ce recueil, tronqué de toutes les obscénités dont il étoit rempli, est passé en Prusse, et il n’y a pas grande perte” (p. 11).

The recueil Mariette thought “no great loss” for having left France, is undoubtedly that which

is now held in the collection of Edinburgh University.<sup>[1]</sup> It accounts for 95 of the extant pages of drawings from the period of the artist's confinement at *les Petites Maisons*. Mariette may not have been aware of another set of drawings by Focus that stayed in private hands in Paris, where they remain to this day. These two sets of drawings were the main feature of the exhibition in the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Paris (13 October 2018–6 January 2019), along with the few extant landscape sketches signed by or attributed to the artist. Without any landscape paintings that can be firmly attributed to Focus, the exhibition and catalogue provide context for those lost works with reference to Gaspard Dughet (also known as Gaspard Poussin after his master, Nicolas Poussin), one of the best-known French landscape painters of the mid-seventeenth century.

Close inspection of the *écritures dessinées* on display in the exhibition revealed that many of those pictures were high-quality facsimiles of sheets that had been permanently glued and bound together, probably in the nineteenth century around the time that the volume was acquired by Edinburgh University. This highlights a common problem for the public display of works of graphic art. So often they remain fixed in a form that predates modern musicological practice. The individual work was collected, bound, and serialized in the pages of a codex, radically limiting the ways that the viewer can engage with each work. One of the most unfortunate results of this zealous posthumous binding for the Edinburgh volume is the loss of the texts that fill the reverses of Focus' sheets. Those texts were fortunately preserved in the unbound leaves that remain in a private collection in Paris, hinting at just how much has been lost. The production of excellent facsimiles, an elegant solution to this problem for the exhibition, is ameliorated further by the publication of a complete catalogue of the *écritures dessinées*, hallucinatory studies that promise to thrill, shock, surprise, and delight scholars of old regime France in equal measure.

The team responsible for the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue were faced with the problem of how to interpret images and text that undermine the language of French academic art of the seventeenth century. At that time, legibility was a fundamental quality of academic painting, and of history painting in particular. Stories and abstract ideas impossible to illustrate in a straight-forward, mimetic way were represented with signs and symbols, personifications and allegories. That symbolic language was codified in texts like Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, a lexicon of representations drawn from antiquarian study of ancient coins, medals, and other artifacts of the Greco-Roman world. First published in 1593, then continuously in new editions in many languages, Ripa's book was an indispensable resource for artists of the *Académie*. Works by those artists normally reinforce that symbolic language through the repetition of forms and attributes that replicate a relatively stable set of meanings. The *écritures dessinées* of Focus destabilize the language of allegory by replicating its forms but not its meanings.

In the world of Focus, there is a familiar pantheon of gods and personifications alongside a bestiary of emblematic animals. Those who are new to early modern history painting could be forgiven for being just as baffled by standard history and allegory paintings that play by the accepted rules of signs and symbols as they would be by Focus's pictures that subvert them. It is precisely in his capacity to conjure recognizable forms, but to untether them from their agreed upon meanings, that renders Focus' work problematic for traditional iconographic interpretation that we might anticipate from a monographic exhibition and book on an artist of this period.

The introduction provided by Emanuelle Brugerolles and David Guillet draws upon a precedent for studies and exhibitions of works of art by alienated or mentally ill artists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (for example, studies of Richard Dadd (1817-86), best known for the paintings he produced while confined to Bethlem and Broadmoor hospitals). The catalogue includes informative essays by art historians Brugerolles, Christian Michel, and Marianne Cojannot-Le Blanc on the artist's life, the genre of landscape, and the analysis of his work. The essays and the individual entries for each of the 135 catalogued works succeed in providing social and historical context for Focus' oeuvre, despite limited extant archival material.

Marianne Cojannot-La Blanc and Christian Michel do an excellent job of gleaning what they can from incidental details that provide an insight into commonplace experience for those catalogue entries. *Scène de bateleurs* (cat 15), for example, shows a temporary street theatre erected on the banks of the Seine, a quotidian detail rarely, if ever, seen in official imagery commissioned by the Crown. In the lower left of *L'atelier de Le Brun* (cat 37), there is an engraver working on his copper plate, copying a painting before him with the aid of a mirror so as to engrave in reverse and preserve the original direction of the portrait for the printed sheet. A detail that emulates Raphael's *Fire in the Borgo* in the *Stanze di Raffaello* in the Apostolic Palace of the Vatican is found in *Procession* (cat 34). Recognizable details such as these allow the authors to make fascinating, if somewhat conventional, interpretations of Focus' work.

The problem of how to deal with the illegible and seemingly nonsensical elements of the *écritures dessinées* is addressed with essays by historian of medicine, Joël Coste, and professor of psychiatry, Bernard Granger. Coste provides a history of mental institutions in the old regime with particular focus on *les Petites Maisons*. Granger's "La folie de Georges Focus: tentative diagnostic rétrospectif" is a fine idea for an approach to these works, even if (predictably) he fails to make a firm diagnosis.

Nevertheless, Granger provides some fascinating insights. He notes that mental illness rarely diminishes the capacity for technical skill for an artist, and rightly notes that Focus' oeuvre does not fall under the category of *l'art brut* [outsider art]. Indeed, as a member of the *Académie*, Focus was the ultimate insider. Moreover, Granger suggests that the density of text and image in the *écritures dessinées* conforms to a pattern found in the writings and works of art produced by those suffering from severe forms of psychosis: "L'étude de la production littéraire ou artistique des malades mentaux a montré chez les psychotiques une horreur de vide et le besoin de remplir chaque espace de la feuille. Cela a été interprété comme un façon de lutter contre la destruction psychique et l'angoisse de morcellement" (pp. 100-101).

Ultimately, the psychiatric study of the *écritures dessinées* leads us to post-modern questions about the artist's subjective experience. It is rare to find such a large body of work from an artist that focusses on the self from seventeenth-century France. It is precisely that which makes these works such a fascinating bridge between historical and contemporary concerns.

I would argue that the subversive and hallucinatory works of Focus reveal a more fundamental problem for the study of French academic art, however. These works remind us that the symbolic language of academic art demands an unspoken contract for those who both employ and interpret it: an agreement about the relationship between the symbols and their meanings (the signifier and signified, to use the terminology of semiotics). If that contract is broken, even

inadvertently by an artist like Focus as a result of psychosis, the promised legibility of academic art is undermined.

#### NOTE

[1] The Edinburgh recueil has been digitized and can be viewed online: Georges Focus, *Recueil de Dessesins Ridicules par le nomme Foque peintre de l'Academie Royale, mort aux Petites maisons vers l'annee 1695*, University of Edinburgh. SRD.1.2:

<https://images.is.ed.ac.uk/luna/servlet/detail/UoEgal~5~5~83192~106994:Recueil-de-Dessesins-Ridicules-par-l?qvq=q:foque&mi=0&trs=109#> (consulted 30 June 2019).

Robert Wellington  
Australian National University  
[robert.wellington@anu.edu.au](mailto:robert.wellington@anu.edu.au)

Copyright © 2019 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 redistribution/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