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Anne Leonard, ed., *Theme and Variations: The Multiple Sorceries of Félix Buhot*. Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2018. 60 pp. Full color illustrations. \$15.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-935573-59-6.

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This review considers *Theme and Variations: The Multiple Sorceries of Félix Buhot*, a small catalogue produced to accompany an exhibition of mostly prints at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art, during the spring and summer of 2018. Anne Leonard curated the exhibition and edited the catalogue, in her previous role as senior curator of European art and director of publications and research at the Smart Museum. As of January 2019, Dr. Leonard is the Manton Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. The exhibition comprised a cache of presumably rarely seen etchings by Félix Buhot from the collection of Charles Hack and the Hearn Family, with a couple of works from the Smart Museum's collection. Buhot was a talented and moderately successful *peintre-graveur*, whose legacy was perhaps obscured by the art historical tendency to focus on the vanguardism of Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. During the late nineteenth century, the term *peintre-graveur* described a printmaker who approached etching as a visually compelling medium its own right, rather than as simply a means for producing multiples, adopting a "painterly" or technically flexible approach to create varied impressions of a single composition.^[1] *Theme and Variations* appeared as an adjunct to a larger exhibition of contemporary painting and sculpture, *Expanding Narratives: The Figure and the Ground*; Leonard contends that *Theme and Variations* addresses "similar questions of the dissolution of the figure and ground in the realm of printmaking" (p. 5), a point that is not noticeably expounded in the catalogue.

A fascinating figure among late-nineteenth century French *peintre-graveurs*, Buhot's oeuvre remains under-exhibited and under-explored. In contrast to Leonard's other Smart Museum publications, particularly *Looking and Listening in Nineteenth-Century France* (with Martha Ward) and *Awash in Color: French and Japanese Prints* (with Chelsea Foxwell), which contain compelling interpretive responses by multiple scholars, at 60 pages with 60 color plates, *Theme and Variations* is very much the "booklet" that the Smart Museum's website describes it to be.^[2] The catalogue contains lovely reproductions of the works from the exhibition and informative technical and background information in the student-written entries on each specific composition, but I found myself noting questions as I read, the answers to which I had to find in other sources. I found the footnotes sparse and would have appreciated a selected bibliography. As Leonard states in a footnote to her introduction (p. 6), Jay McKean Fisher and Colles Baxter's *Félix Buhot, Peintre-Graveur: Prints, Drawings, and Paintings* (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 1983) is still the most comprehensive source in English for biographical and interpretive content on Buhot.

The National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.) published a booklet in conjunction with their 2005-6 exhibition, *The Prints of Félix Buhot: Impressions of City and Sea*, the majority of the content of which one may find on their website.[3]

Theme and Variations begins with a short “Introduction and Acknowledgements” essay, followed by one-to-three-paragraph catalogue entries, providing specific information on each of the seventeen exhibited compositions, most represented in multiple states. In her introduction, Leonard describes the origins of the exhibition in Charles Hack’s Manhattan apartment, where the Buhot prints in his collection “began stacking up on the piano...and forming clusters” of “three, five, or even seven impressions of a single composition [that] would arrange themselves into series that mapped the evolution of Buhot’s thought and practice...” (p. 3). Then she devotes a few paragraphs, before the acknowledgements portion, to contextualizing Buhot in his place and time, which for me proved insufficient. Even for a historian of nineteenth-century prints, Buhot is an obscure figure. While timing and circumstance may have prohibited Leonard from a lengthier publication, I would have appreciated just a bit more information about the following areas: the artist’s methods, his biography, and his placement within late nineteenth-century French printmaking.

Leonard’s subtitle for her exhibition--*The Multiple Sorceries of Félix Buhot*--is evocative and apt, relating Buhot’s experimental approach to printmaking to the alchemy of a sorcerer. She states that Buhot individuated single impressions through varying techniques, papers and inks, processes which are elaborated in the catalogue entries, but a further descriptive sentence or two, or perhaps an example from the catalogue, would have better underscored Buhot’s distinctiveness. In terms of biography, I believe that there are a few aspects worth noting to help the reader better understand the works in the catalogue. First, Buhot married an Englishwoman and thus spent time in England as well as in France, explaining the English scenes in this oeuvre and the themes of crossing the Channel. His connection to England also facilitated his relationship with Seymour Hayden, who introduced him to American collectors, his popularity with whom Leonard emphasizes (p. 4); Second, Buhot was well-respected among French print enthusiasts during his lifetime. His etchings appeared in Salons between 1875 and 1886, the *Blanc et Noir* exhibition of 1886 and the Société des Peintres-Graveurs exhibition of 1889.[4] His first retrospective, which Leonard does mention, took place in New York in 1888 (p. 4). Third, Buhot lived in Montmartre and worked at 71 boulevard de Clichy from 1882-9. Nostalgic for Old Paris, he sought to record for posterity the sections of his neighborhood untouched by Haussmannization, connecting him to late Romantic ideals.[5]

Leonard acknowledges Rembrandt, as well as the lesser-known Dutch Baroque printer Hercules Segers as sources of inspiration for Buhot (p. 4), but other than placing the *peintre-graveur* later than the Etching Revival of the 1860s, she does not situate him within his 1870s and 1880s French milieu. Buhot came of age in the era of Impressionism, and it should be acknowledged that the *peintre-graveurs* of that movement, namely Edgar Degas, Mary Cassatt and Camille Pissarro, shared a penchant for experimentation and creating unique impressions of single compositions. Likewise, Buhot is certainly not alone among printmakers working in Europe who found a more receptive market for their work in the United States. Even so, Buhot derided what he saw as Impressionism’s emphasis on empirical observation, in favor of imposing moody atmospheres on his scenes of daily life.[6] I was struck, when examining Buhot’s manipulations of the atmospheres of his compositions, with additions to his plates in etching, drypoint and aquatint, by the similarity of his approach to that of tangential Impressionist Ludovic Lepic: In

1876, Lepic printed eighty-five versions of *Vues des bords de l'Escaut* (1876) to showcase how varied applications of monotype to an etched plate could evoke dramatic changes in weather.[7]

Technical innovations aside, Buhot's interest in connecting his prints to poetry and music and his privileging of memory and imagination over observation aligns him thematically with the late Romanticism of the 1860s, particularly the Société des Trois of James McNeill Whistler, Alphonse Legros and Henri Fantin-Latour, positioning him as a precursor to Symbolism. Buhot's "symphonic margins" further highlight the *peintre-graveur's* concerns with musicality, memory and imagination. The descriptor "symphonic margins" refers to Buhot's use of the margins of his plates as venues for aesthetic workshoping, filling them with vivacious, sketch-like imagery that enhanced or reinterpreted the main scene. Leonard uses this terminology in quotes in her introduction (p. 4), but it is not until the third mention of "symphonic margins," on pages 46-9 of the catalogue, that we are provided with a source, a letter from print connoisseur, Henri Béraldi, for whom Buhot designed the frontispiece for his dictionary of nineteenth-century engravers. Proof states still inclusive of Buhot's whimsical marginalia were prized by collectors during the artist's lifetime and beyond.[8] Colles Baxter suggests that the visual aesthetic of Buhot's margins as framing devices for the main impression took inspiration from medieval illuminated manuscripts, French popular songbooks and Japanese woodcuts.[9] In keeping with the artist's Romantic tendencies, I see an affinity between Buhot's "symphonic margins" and the collectible marginalia of working states of Eugène Delacroix's lithographs.[10] Additionally, Buhot's frontispiece for Octave Uzanne's *Les zigzags d'un curieux* bears a strong resemblance to Francisco Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*.

The catalogue entries accompanying the color plates of the etchings exhibited in *Theme and Variations* were written by graduate and undergraduate students, enrolled in a class Leonard taught on nineteenth-century European prints during the winter of 2018. The reproduced etchings consist of multiple impressions of seventeen compositions, which include commissioned works, such as the frontispieces for Béraldi and Uzanne; city, country and port scenes, in which atmospheric manipulations to the plate often transform the anecdotal into something more ominous; two works inspired by Charles Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*, and Buhot's personal frontispiece. In keeping with the values of Romanticism and Symbolism, the frontispieces and the Baudelairean works are poetic, moody and even macabre in terms of their linework, tones and content. Accordingly, Buhot's atmospheric additions to his city, country and port scenes seem to draw more from memories or the artist's imagination than direct observation.[11] Underscoring this emphasis on memory, many of the exhibited works contain the aforementioned whimsical marginalia that Buhot typically omitted from his final states.

As mentioned previously, the reproductions of the prints are excellent, for the most part, allowing the reader to observe the nuances pointed out by the catalogue entries.[12] For example, the entries for *Une Matinée d'Hiver au Quai de l'Hôtel-Dieu* and *La Fête nationale au boulevard Clichy* include large details, showcasing the complexities of their tones, achieved through etching and aquatint (pp. 19 and 23). In the case of *Une Jetée en Angleterre*, it is possible to see the effects of one of the impressions having been printed on gold flecked paper (p. 30). The second printing of the third state of *La Traversée* has an orange tone, which seems to translate well in reproduction, thanks to having been printed "à l'essence," meaning that the paper was soaked in turpentine (p. 33).

The catalogue entries provide useful basic information about the contents and circumstances of each composition, technical information about the methods Buhot used, and the variables that give each state its uniqueness. The entries also include compelling observations about the contents of the prints and their marginalia that a casual reader might miss. For example, Charlotte Saul in her reading of *La Fête nationale au boulevard Clichy* posits that the dog relieving himself on the lamppost (a symbol of progress) in the foreground may “complicate a simple nationalistic reading” of the work (p. 20). Alina Cui suggests that the harpist and seasick passenger in *La Traversée* are deliberate references to Richard Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* (p. 32), yet another manifestation of the artist’s affinity for late Romantic/early Symbolist poetics and musicality, echoed by the Baudelairean works, *La Dame aux Cygnes* (pp. 34-5) and *Spleen et idéal ou le fiacre aux amours* (pp. 12-13). Buhot’s affinity for making the anecdotal poetic is further emphasized by three successive states of *La Place des Martyrs et la Taverne du Bagne*, as described by Natalie Smith (pp. 42-5). The work depicts a Montmartre tavern where the waitstaff dressed as prisoners and prison guards. The first state is a daytime scene, while in the last state, “Buhot used heavy plate tone and brown ink to render a more ominous, nocturnal image.” In addition to ethereal “symphonic margins,” each state includes a poem about the establishment in the lower margin by Jean le Fustec. Finally, I found it notable that the top margin of the seventh state of *Frontispice pour Les Graveurs du XIXe siècle de Henri Béraldi*, as pointed out by Saul, shows atmospheric cityscapes of Paris and London on either side of a bust of Rembrandt (p. 47). Indeed, these were the margins that Béraldi described as “symphonic.” In addition to highlighting his admiration for old world architectural vistas in both cities, Buhot seemingly underscored the cross-channel connectedness that prints fostered among artists during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

To summarize my observations, this booklet would not prove useful to someone looking for in-depth or even general background information on Buhot and his historical context. However, the catalogue, which contains beautiful reproductions of impressions not readily available might prove helpful to someone researching a particular composition. With regard to new ground covered by this publication, or at least suggestions of potential avenues for further research on Buhot, I was particularly stuck by hints at connections between Buhot and Charles Baudelaire’s poem-theory of *Correspondances* between the arts and the senses, ideas explored more elaborately by the authors in Leonard’s exhibition catalogue, *Looking and Listening*.

NOTES

[1] In a letter to Seymour Hayden, Buhot described his etchings as “paintings on copper”: “original etchings with the characteristics of a composition and without any special purpose are for me paintings.” See Jay McKean Fisher and Colles Baxter, et al., *Félix Buhot, Peintre-Graveur: Prints, Drawings, and Paintings* (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 1983), 33.

[2] <https://smartmuseum.uchicago.edu/exhibitions/expanding-narratives-the-multiple-sources-of-felix-buhot/>, cited September 10, 2019.

[3] Gregory Jecmen, *The Prints of Félix Buhot: Impressions of City and Sea* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2005) and “The Prints of Félix Buhot: Impressions of City and Sea,” National Gallery of Art, cited September 10, 2019, <https://www.nga.gov/features/slideshows/the-prints-of-felix-buhot-impressions-of-city-and-sea.html>.

[4] Fisher and Baxter, 21-2.

[5] Jecmen, 5.

[6] In fact, Buhot penned a humorous article in 1888, contrasting the two paths of modernism: [Pointe-Sèche], “Le Whistlerisme et le Pissarisme à l’exposition des XXXIII,” *Journal des arts*, January 13, 1888.

[7] Michel Melot, *The Impressionist Print*, trans. Caroline Beamish (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), 123. Many examples of these works are in the Baltimore Museum of Art’s collection and may be found online at [http://collection.artbma.org/emuseum/view/objects/aslist/search\\$0040?t:state:flow=7ac90f4c-3258-4f0b-941f-3441414f0fc7](http://collection.artbma.org/emuseum/view/objects/aslist/search$0040?t:state:flow=7ac90f4c-3258-4f0b-941f-3441414f0fc7) Cited September 10, 2019.

[8] The translated letter from Henri Béraudi to Félix Buhot from March 19, 1886 states, “The people who have only the ordinary copies write me imploring letters to have the symphonic margins!” See also Colles Baxter, “Some notes on Margins: Format, Sources, Meanings,” in Fisher and Baxter, 1983, 53-62.

[9] Fisher and Baxter, 55.

[10] For examples see Ashley Dunn, “Eugène Delacroix, Printmaker Par Excellence” (November 7, 2018), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, cited September 10, 2019, <https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/collection-insights/2018/eugene-delacroix-printmaker>

[11] Indeed, Buhot studied with Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran, known for his teaching method that stressed memory rather than imitation as the key to originality. See Fisher and Baxter, 15.

[12] I qualify this statement, because certain of the plates of *Frontispice pour Zigzags d’un curieux* appear a bit blurry (pp. 56-9).

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