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Willa Z. Silverman, *Henri Vever: Champion de l'Art Nouveau*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2018. 377 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. €26.90 (pb). ISBN 978-22-006-1941-1.

Review by Elizabeth Emery, Montclair State University

Like a simple wooden case preserving manifold treasures, the title of Willa Silverman's new book, *Henri Vever: Champion de l'Art Nouveau*, barely hints at the gems it contains. At first glance, one might overlook it as just another biography of a now-forgotten fin-de-siècle character, jewelry designer, business owner, and art collector Henri Vever (1854-1942). In reality, however, opening this book brings to life—in sparkling detail—the events of the year 1898 as witnessed by a wealthy artist and entrepreneur whose luxury trade brought him in contact with affluent French and international customers as well as employees, suppliers, fellow merchants, artists, and collectors.

The near-daily journals kept by Vever from January 1898 to March 1901 (on notebooks bearing a stamp from the Papeterie du Bon Marché) are conserved at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC.<sup>[1]</sup> They provide remarkable insight into his work and leisure activities, and especially into the different social circles he frequented. Silverman has wisely chosen to focus this volume on a single year, 1898, not just because it was an important moment for Vever (it opens with his delight at having been awarded the Légion d'honneur), but also because of the wealth of events occurring that year. Vever acknowledges many of them, from the escalation of the Dreyfus Affair and the Battle of Manila to the deaths of artists such as Gustave Moreau, Jean-Louis Forain, and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, and from the assassination of the Empress of Austria to a total eclipse of the moon (shrouded by clouds). Entries brim with accounts of family and business life, observations of social and commercial trends, dinner parties and business events, shopping, concerts, art exhibits, summer vacation activities, and the effects of new technology, all recorded in lively and engaging prose. Silverman has painstakingly researched and annotated the journal entries to provide modern readers with information about the hundreds of named people, places, and events. An extensive index allows readers immediate access to the individuals that most interest them.

It is more profitable, however, to read the book from cover to cover. Vever's painterly eye for detail (he trained with Jean-Léon Gérôme) fleshes out the contours of daily life in 1898. His minute descriptions of Parisian dinner parties—both formal and informal—record table settings, menus, wines, seating plans, clothing, conversation, and ancillary activities such as dancing or riddle-telling (pp. 114, 173, and many others). His blow-by-blow description of a morning of surgery at l'Hôpital Broussais provides a near-cinematic reconstitution of a hysterectomy and

gallstone removal, from participants and protective gear to process, sound effects, and measures of hygiene (pp. 158-160). Many entries describe trips to the theatre, the opera, art exhibits, parks and gardens, with friends or with his wife (Jeanne Monthiers) and daughter (Marguerite), which provide a sense of the rhythm of bourgeois Parisian consumption of spectacle within the workweek. Other sections evoke provincial traditions or celebrations, such as a “concours de pompiers” (p. 268) or cycling tourism (“de Paris au Havre à bicyclette [220 kil] sans grande fatigue”; p. 237). Vever’s extensive descriptions of daily and vacation cycling with friends and family, both male and female, reveal not just the physical benefits, but also the psychological horizons opened by this new sport.

Art historians, on the other hand, will appreciate Vever’s discussion of art collecting and his thoughts about the design and creation of artworks now preserved in museums: anguish or pleasure regarding the quality of his artistic vision, relationships with other artists who produced drawings for him (notably Eugène Grasset and René Lalique), and his commissioning of artisans to implement designs. A section of color plates in the middle of the book allows readers to study some of the most iconic pieces produced by the Maison Vever. The activities he undertakes over the calendar year also provide insight into the ebb and flow of commercial life: supply, demand, investment, and theft. His ruminations about the delicate balance he must strike between creating museum-quality artworks and jewelry solid enough to hold up to everyday wear provide insights into the thought process of late nineteenth-century artists beholden to the market, as does his outrage at counterfeiting (p. 125).

Vever’s voice provides for a pleasurable reading experience: the forty-three-year old is infinitely curious about the people and the world around him and unfailingly generous in his dealings with others. His attention to detail adds valuable texture to the events he witnesses, surpassing his probable model, Edmond de Goncourt. Vever knew Goncourt through the *Dîners des amis de l’art japonais* the novelist had attended from 1892 until his death in 1896, and the artist would have been familiar with the excerpts of the Goncourt *Journal* published in newspapers from 1866. Vever’s long descriptions of these “Japanese” dinners (people in attendance, the food consumed, the objects they shared with one another, their conversations), for example, bring into sharp relief the homosocial practices recently explored by Christopher Reed in *Bachelor Japanists*.<sup>[2]</sup> But where Goncourt’s entries were often tinged by jealousy-infused rants, Vever is rarely snarky. He is, however, brutally honest. He records conversations such as Tadamasu Hayashi’s description of a harikari ceremony at the 24 November dinner (p. 304), for example, while describing his fellow guest James MacNeill Whistler’s appearance as that of “un vieux violoniste” or “vieux clown” (p. 304).

An avid collector of Barbizon and Impressionist paintings, Japanese prints and Japanese and Islamic decorative arts, Vever offers frank appraisals of the quality of others’ collections, describing the homes of Charles Gillot, Gaston Migeon, and Raymond Koechlin and recording in extensive detail their shopping expeditions, the experience of sweltering hot auction houses, and prices paid. As a result, the journal provides new insights into the practices of a great number of Paris art dealers and shopkeepers, the items they sold in 1898, and their commercial techniques (offering promotional items, serving as proxies at auction, establishing lines of credit). Vever also chronicles the partnerships and exchanges undertaken with colleagues such as Siegfried Bing and Louis Comfort Tiffany. International clients, such as H.O. and Louisine Havemeyer and Japanese and Russian nobles are noted, and their preferences recorded.

Vever, who served as mayor of Noyers (Eure) in 1898, also acknowledges people not always mentioned in private journals, notably women and members of the working class. His inclusion of them in descriptions of events such as dinners, weddings, and funerals, to cycling, school exams and award ceremonies, and hunting excursions provide a much better example of mixed fin-de-siècle sociability than most men of his class provided in their private writings. In fact, this volume's inclusive vision of social gatherings has proved extremely helpful for my own recent work on women's involvement in the *japoniste* moment: his attention to detail means that he scrupulously records all the shopkeepers he visits and all the people in attendance at social events.[3] At one moment, for example, he corrects himself after describing a dinner he hosted for his friends as "Rien que des hommes," backtracking to acknowledge that his wife and daughter had participated (pp. 101-102). Vever regularly mentions the events to which he took his wife and daughter (theatre, salon, parks, bike rides) and he provides insight into a father's mind as he comments on his daughter's social, emotional, and pedagogical development.

Vever's frank description of his emotional life provides another unexpected pleasure: his reactions provide insight into the social and psychological pressures exerted on bourgeois men at this time. Unlike Goncourt's desire to exalt himself for posterity, Vever is not at all self-aggrandizing. His remarkably candid appraisal of his own desires makes one wonder, in fact, what he hoped to accomplish in keeping a journal. On the one hand, the record of social life provides the kind of valuable details about activities, people, and conversations captured by Goncourt.[4] On the other hand, the diary seems to serve a therapeutic function, especially when Vever confides his joys and depressions. In one entry, for example, the mostly equanimous diarist explodes in fury at his wife, lamenting his unhappy, sexless marriage and contemplating divorce (pp. 284-286). He uses cycling and art collecting as outlets to channel this frustrated desire in an attempt to avoid the extra-marital entanglements that plague his peers (he recognizes the economic repercussions of taking a mistress). Many other instances mark his tender relationship to parents and brother (his mother sickens and dies over the course of 1898). Only rarely does he complain about the artistic sacrifice he has made in taking over a family business passed from his grandfather to father rather than pursuing a career in painting (pp. 233-235). He regularly expresses delight in children, animals, and the natural world (pp. 219-240).

In addition to this treasure-trove of information about the daily life of an artist-entrepreneur in 1898, Silverman has provided an extremely useful bio-bibliography related to Vever, his family, and his works. Her 75-page preface is a precious book within a book. Accompanied by a chronology of Vever's life, a family history, and a genealogical chart, this preface situates Vever's experiences of 1898 within a much broader context. This valuable background material traces the history of the Alsatian Vever family, long respected in Metz for their metalwork. Displaced by the Franco-Prussian war, Vever's father purchased the shop of recently deceased Parisian jeweler Gustave Baugrand at 19, rue de la Paix, and transformed the new establishment into a success continued by his sons (the Maison Vever won prizes at expositions in 1889, 1897, and 1900).

In her preface, Silverman summarizes and thematically groups some of the running motifs treated by Vever in his journal. After a presentation of biographical elements, she provides an overview of the Maison Vever and the major influence it exerted on the development of Art Nouveau, particularly through international collaboration with figures such as Lalique, Tiffany, Gallé, and Mucha. Subsequent sections evoke Vever's evolving art collection, from his major collection of Barbizon painters and Impressionists in the 1880s and 1890s, capped by a prominent

sale in 1897, to his Japanese collections and many friendships within the *japoniste* community. A final passage traces his family life, his role as *châtelain* of Noyers, acquired as part of his marriage to Jeanne Monthiers in 1881, and the rhythm of life in an upper-class Catholic family punctuated by holidays and vacations. The book itself is interspersed with family photos, color reproductions of some of his iconic jewelry, works of art he collected, and homes and haunts.

Veve's journal is such a delight to read that readers will be happy to know that Silverman is preparing a second volume. I hope she will have the space in subsequent prefaces to provide more information about the manuscripts themselves (content, form, legibility, years covered) and their provenance (why the Smithsonian?). Similarly, what is the relationship among the different notebooks? Silverman evokes the diary Vever kept on a trip from France to Russia from July to September 1891, but without explaining its relationship to the other volumes, such as the salacious record of amorous conquests and apprenticeships he recorded from 1878-1879. These differ dramatically from the activities acknowledged twenty years later by the married (and self-restrained) forty-three-year-old Vever. It would also be helpful to know more about Vever's practice and goals of life writing, particularly in comparison to contemporaries like Goncourt. But these questions go beyond the volume itself; they stem from a reader captivated by the material and eagerly awaiting the next installment.

Silverman has performed a true service to the profession by discovering, editing, and publishing these journals. Vever's approachable style, clear observation of contemporary events, and fascinating description of social trends provide new insight into daily life in 1890s France while revealing a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the work of avant-garde artists. Her modestly titled book contains real treasure for all those interested in fin-de-siècle French culture.

## NOTES

[1] The "Henri Vever Papers" measure 2.5 linear feet and contain 35 items produced from 1875 to 1932. There are six notebooks of journal entries, an account ledger, 20 photographs, a guest list, a "ceremonial pommel," and six paintings made by Vever himself. <https://sova.si.edu/record/FSA.A1988.04> Silverman has combined the contents of three of these notebooks to present the entirety of 1898 entries in the present volume.

[2] Christopher Reed, *Bachelor Japonists: Japanese Aesthetics and Western Masculinities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

[3] Elizabeth Emery, *Reframing Japonisme: Women and the Asian Art Market in Nineteenth-Century France (1853–1914)* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020).

[4] The tidiness of the Smithsonian manuscripts suggests that he either recopied his first drafts for posterity or was a remarkably fluent writer.

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