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Richard R. Brettell, *On Modern Beauty: Three Paintings by Manet, Gauguin and Cézanne*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2019. 103pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781606066065.

Review by Caroline Boyle-Turner, Independent Scholar.

For those who have read and admired Richard Brettell's in-depth scholarship and analytical abilities over the last several decades, this small, unpretentious book, dedicated to a discussion of the concept of "beauty", comes as a surprise. In it, there are nuggets that amaze and delight the serious reader as well as the general museum audience for whom the remarks were initially intended. The book began as a series of three lectures presented at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles in 2016. The author's stated challenge was to explore the definition of "Beauty" in order to "see how far that concept can be stretched in modern art" (p. 39). He sought to expand its traditional associations by applying his analysis to three late nineteenth century French paintings, one each by Manet, Gauguin and Cézanne, all of which are part of the Getty Museum's permanent collection. Each one, according to the author, triggers a different response to the question "Is this beautiful?", leading to unexpected definitions of what could be considered "beautiful." In the end, however, he eloquently offers his own analysis, one that gives the individual viewer the power to make his or her own discoveries. What he provides is guidance to stimulate an open-ended exploration of the subject of beauty.

Brettell's first attempt to define beauty was in the form of a lecture with images and, most likely, many spontaneous remarks. The book reflects this informal presentation: it flows easily, with no pretentious academic vocabulary. Unfortunately, there are no footnotes to reinforce the seriousness of the research. And despite many specific references to them in his text, there are few illustrations to strengthen the arguments. Each chapter begins strongly, with discussions of the particular definition of "beauty" the author attributes to the painting in question. However, by the middle of the chapter, Brettell's analyses begin to diverge into more scholarly and sometimes obscure comparisons to works that may or may not have been available to the three artists under discussion.

In a rather meandering introduction, the author broaches the concept of "modern," the adjective used in the title of the book to designate the historical period of his study. He quickly summarizes various proposed dates and rationales for establishing the beginning of that era in the 1860s. He focuses on Baudelaire's linkage of the term with such concepts as the "ephemeral" and "contingent." The label "Classical beauty" then launches the author's more extensive examination of "beauty" itself (pp. 3-6).

According to Brettell, Johann Joachim Winkelmann, among others, focused on an artist's attainment of beauty in his/her works only after long study and invention in order to create something deserving of the title of classical beauty. Success in reaching this omnipresent goal waxed and waned in Western artmaking over the subsequent centuries. The Greeks achieved this level of perfection in the fifth century BCE, but decline followed, only to reach a high-point again in fifteenth century Italy. Brettell follows his concise summary with a discourse on the rise and fall of the term "beauty" as another constantly changing concept in art history. In our era, the word fell into disgrace in the late twentieth century, especially among artists and students of art and art history.

The first painting discussed in Brettell's book provides an easy segue into his topic: Manet's 1881 oil painting entitled *Jeanne* or *Spring* (Getty Museum). It was shown in the 1882 Paris Salon, along with the more widely known and analyzed *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (The Courtauld Gallery). In this chapter, the author equates "modern" with "fashion" (p. 2). Manet's pairing of the two paintings in the Salon celebrated his freedom, for the first time, to make his own choice of the paintings he wanted to exhibit. His underlying theme in the bar scene was seduction, while the fresh-faced and well-dressed young Jeanne emphasized youth, fashion and beauty. Taking a page from the current academic interest in the identity and social status of models, Brettell informs us that she was a Parisian named Anne Darlaud, born in 1885. She took the professional name of Jeanne de Marsy and posed for many artists other than Manet, including Renoir. She was only sixteen when she posed for Manet's *Jeanne*. This is not a portrait, however, but an homage to youth and fashion. Students of fashion history will find Brettell's long digression into that world fascinating.

Brettell goes on to refer to *Jeanne* in the context of Renaissance portraiture, comparing it to Pisanello's *Portrait of a Princess*, c. 1432-36 (Louvre). The profile view of this aristocratic young woman surrounded by butterflies and flowers is convincing, yet, as the author admits, Manet could never have seen the painting; It did not enter the Louvre's collection until 1893, long after the artist's death (p. 31). Manet might have known of the painting, or at least of others like it, from books or exhibitions featuring other portraits of beautiful young women in similar poses and compositions. With this remark, Brettell opens a new avenue for art appreciation: whether in a book or in a museum, a viewer may turn to his or her own aesthetic experiences while focusing on a particular work of art. The challenge is to the observer in direct confrontation with the work. Training one's eye to recognize and to define personal choices of what is beautiful or not is part of what Brettell encourages as he leads us through different possibilities of what he acknowledges as elements of beauty.

The chapter on Manet's *Jeanne* closes with a detour into the subject of gardens, the setting for the portrait. Brettell leads us through the history of rhododendrons, for example. These horticultural asides offer a few remarks on Manet's lively and dense color patterns in that garden setting. That the scene is a planted garden reminds us that the setting and the silk flowers in the model's hat and the flower patterns on her dress are as artificial as the reflections in the mirror in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*.

Following Brettell's often lyrical hymn to youthful beauty in the first chapter, the next painting he analyzes comes as a shock: Paul Gauguin's *Arii matamoe* (The Royal End). It depicts the severed head of a young male who appears to be Melanesian rather than Polynesian. The scene is gruesome, yet Brettell goes to great lengths to teach us how to find beauty in it. There is no

blood to explain the head perched on a folded white cloth. The setting is a sumptuous, vaguely South Pacific looking palace. The colors are rich, vibrant and saturated. The head becomes a sculpture—full of potential meaning, yet also an object both finely crafted and timeless. Brettell calls attention to the “beautifully conceived” white cushion, urging us to see its softness and ignore the violent connotations of its function (p. 39-40). One might think of the sumptuous white sheet Manet created for *Olympia* (Musée d’Orsay), a work Gauguin admired and copied before he left for Tahiti in 1891. Brettell correctly refers to a possible source of the image from Gauguin’s attendance at a guillotining in Paris in 1890. Also relevant would have been the death of the last King of Tahiti, Pomeré V that occurred just as he arrived in Tahiti. In ancient Polynesian tradition, the burial rituals of high-ranking men and especially chiefs included separating the head from the body, placing it in a special carved wooden receptacle and hiding it in an isolated cave so that no enemies could steal it as a trophy. Gauguin would have read about this procedure in J.A. Moerenhout’s *Travels to the islands of the Pacific Ocean* (1837) which was his primary source of information about the ancient traditions of these islands. By the time King Pomeré died in June 1891, these burial customs had been banned by the Christian and French colonial authorities. The King’s remains were laid to rest in an ugly coral tower on the outskirts of Papeete.

In his painting, Gauguin invents a lavish interior that only suggests, but does not illustrate, a typical Tahitian room. The highly decorated wall and the colorful carpet on the floor are the artist’s inventions. What matters is the suggestion of being in an exotic place far from France. One little correction must be noted: Brettell writes of a hooded woman in red seen in the background to the right (p. 45). Close examination of the painting reveals, however, that this is a man with a moustache. Men, however, did not sport moustaches in Tahiti at the time. Gauguin’s penchant for suggestion rather than illustration might have led him to the red cloak’s allusion to the red/brown tapa cloth robe worn by male-only wise men and keepers of the old traditions, as he depicted later in the *Marquesan Man in a Red Cape* (Musée des Beaux Arts, Liège) of 1902.

Gauguin realized that Pomeré’s death marked the end of his dream of finding an idyllic paradise in Tahiti; it had been destroyed by modernization and conquest by the French. As Gauguin made his severed head beautiful, not horrible, Brettell teaches us that the artist turned his focus on the beauty of the people themselves and their lost culture, not on the horrors of the colonial present. The artist’s book, *Noa Noa*, begun in 1893, attempts through association and suggestion to hint at the richness and beauty of what had been destroyed. This lament became the basic theme of Gauguin’s work until his death eleven years after *Arii mataoe*. Brettell effectively ends his analysis with a translation of Gauguin’s lament to this destruction, which includes a stanza that brings to mind the painting as well as the strong sense of loss:

“Come, it is you the dead Gods have chosen,
In the Temple where the nude lays there,
Come, with the candor of your youth wide open,
With the pride of your beauty laid bare.”
(translation by Elpidia Vouitsis, p. 66)

Brettell’s insistence on expanding the definition of “beauty” pushed this reader to stand in front of a very disturbing painting by Francis Bacon and slowly move beyond its troubling imagery to plunge into the lines and colors as almost abstract elements, rather than focusing on the “story.” The push-pull of horror and loveliness heightened the experience of the painting to a degree that surpasses the often overly historical or formal approaches of so many art historians and lecturers.

The painting by Cézanne that Brettell chose as the focus of his third exploration of beauty is another surprise, as was Gauguin's *Arii matamoe*. At first glance, Cézanne's *Italian Woman at a Table* (c. 1895-1900) appears to be a sumptuous study of color and an unusual exercise in spatial organization. Is there more to it?

Despite the author's expressed desire at the end of the book that the viewer should be freed of excessive focuses on traditional art historical research in order to experience the beauty in the painting on his or her own terms, Brettell nonetheless gives us a full palette of well-developed conventional approaches. He makes it all sound like a detective story--weaving together a search for the historical facts while avoiding the often-omnipresent layers of dates and references to works of the past that can obscure the pure pleasure of simply observing a work of art. Brettell asks: Where was the painting done--in Paris or Provence? Is the model an Italian then living in Paris? Did Cézanne's large collections of photographs and books provide inspiration and specific borrowings? The author's long digression into the use of "Melancholia" as a theme provides a useful background for understanding one possible interpretation of the painting, to which Cézanne had never given a title.

Brettell's fascination with the sleeve in Cézanne's painting and comparisons with other famous painted sleeves, however, seems a bit of a stretch. Does every element of a painting have to have an antecedent that the artist consciously or unconsciously copied? We all agree that Delacroix's waterdrops were borrowed from Rubens's *The Disembarkation of Marie de Medici at Marseille* (Louvre), but did Cézanne pull the voluminous sleeve of his model from Raphael's *Baldassare Castiglione*, a painting also in the Louvre? This is not as obvious.

The most moving part of Brettell's analysis of *Italian Woman at a Table* comes in his homage to Meyer Shapiro's eloquent and precise dissection of the formal qualities of this painting (p. 80-81). It is regrettable that there is no footnote to facilitate a curious reader's attempt to delve deeper into Shapiro's discussion. We often forget the pure joy of standing in front of an actual painting and visually exploring every bit of it in order to delight in the placement of the colors and the construction of the composition. Shapiro guides us in the appreciation of Cézanne's mastery to lead the eye from one form to another, ignoring the subject or the story of the work, but focusing only on the pure pleasure of the structure, the "exquisite formal quality" and the "wonderful modeling of the head" (p. 80) for example.

Looking forward, Brettell relates how Cézanne is appreciated in our era for his insistence on "flatness, geometry and a new order" as well as "form not content" (p. 91). The tube-like arms, egg-shaped head, and flat-shaped left-hand predate Cubism and remind the viewer today more of an African mask than of the works of Corot so admired by Cézanne, an influence strongly emphasized by Brettell (pp. 84-85).

The final verdict on Cézanne's definition of beauty, according to Brettell, is that it reflects the artist's passion for structure: an homage to a beautiful line, a gasp of appreciation when the square created by the left arm, the sleeve's far edge, the shoulder and the right hand is recognized. The subject is secondary, unlike Manet's *Jeanne*, for example, which is all about a time-based sense of the beauty of springtime informed by a youthful body and exquisitely painted fashionable clothes. A different focus on the expressive power of color is seen in Gauguin's *Arii Matamoe*, where tropical exoticism as well as a raw frisson of terror are both implied.

There are so many fascinating ideas in *On Modern Beauty* that could be further developed. Using Brettell's ideas as a base, we could widen and deepen our definition and appreciation of what "beauty" meant for other artists from other periods of time. How would these observations help us appreciate the art of different civilizations, for example? Brettell's skill at leading the viewer through formal as well as art historical details of certain paintings can be eye-opening to both novice students of art appreciation as well as art historians and curators, leading them to a lifetime of aesthetic pleasure.

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