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Timothy J. Standring, ed., *Whistler to Cassatt: American Painters in France*. New Haven: Denver Art Museum in association with Yale University Press, 2021. vii + 245 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 9-78-0300254457.

Review by Alexis Clark, North Carolina State University.

Decades have passed since Pierre Bourdieu analyzed the demographics, experiences, and expectations of the museum-visiting, art-loving public.<sup>[1]</sup> Who do we assume to now be the public attending museum exhibitions and reading attendant catalogues on nineteenth-century art? How do we reach this twenty-first century public with histories sparking their continued curiosity, interest, and continued desire to know more? More pressingly, how do we compel this current public to support inclusive, representative, and otherwise complicated histories that may demand rethinking histories long since told, taught, and learned? At a moment when trust in U.S. institutions has eroded and the history wars besiege our classrooms, museums remain surprisingly resilient: nine out of ten people residing in the U.S. report trust in museums.<sup>[2]</sup> In consideration of this trust, coupled with the common charge to educate, the public may be receptive to museums using their walls to expand and extend the history of late nineteenth-century art beyond the battles of the modernist *avant-garde* and academic *arrière-garde*.

As announced by curator Timothy J. Standring, *Whistler to Cassatt: American Painters in France* expressly attempts to disrupt this commonly recited story, even as it frames its account as interested in the *facture*—or the painted stroke—that led to such fractious disputes pitting the *arrière-garde* against the *avant-garde*.<sup>[3]</sup> “Painting in Paris,” Standring summarily notes, “became more complicated than simply the *avant-garde* versus the rear guard” (p. 18). Indeed. Looking at, but also beyond the painted surfaces, Standring and his co-essayists proceed to turn to France’s education and exhibitionary networks, spaces that lured so many U.S. artists and art-loving audiences to make the transatlantic trek: the *École des beaux-arts*, artists’ ateliers, outposts welcoming women artists, and the Salon. Setting aside questions of expatriate status, national affiliation, and identity—questions often raised to police what makes American art American or what makes an American an American—Standring and his co-essayists consider the experiences abroad had by an expansive roster of American artists in Paris: the more stalwart such as Mary Cassatt, William Merritt Chase, Elizabeth Jane Gardner, Winslow Homer, Lilla Cabot Perry, Henry Osawa Tanner, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, and the more esoteric such as Walter Gay, Albert Henry Munsell, and Edgar Melville Ward. Via this array of U.S. artists, Standring and his co-essayists admirably work to explicate the incredibly messy relations between institutions, artists, and styles. Though the catalogue does relay the complications in these relations—and Emmanuelle Brugerolles’s sound essay on the atelier competition and

awards systems counts as an especially worthy addition to all undergraduate syllabi on nineteenth-century art--*American Painters in France* sometimes misses its own mark. In not capturing the malleability and mutability of the responses of the Salon to modern art, or the responses of modern artists to the Salon, *American Painters in France* has struggled to wholly resist the lure of the fabled tale of the *avant-garde* v. *arrière-garde*.

As the catalogue effectively underscores, nineteenth-century U.S. artists occupied competing, even contradictory positions in relation to France's education and education systems. Setting sail to Paris, U.S. artists pursued opportunities to work with well-regarded French artists operating their own ateliers, teaching at the École des beaux-arts, and offering instruction at the Académie Julian: William-Adolphe Bougereau, Alexandre Cabanel, Charles Chaplin, Thomas Couture, Jean-Léon Gérôme, Tony Robert-Fleury, and many more. Compared with the typically unsatisfactory and incomplete descriptions of these *artistes françaises*--"conservative," "academic," or "official"--Brugerolles interestingly claims that Cabanel, for one, "employed teaching methods that to them [U.S. artists] represented modernity, a contrast to the rigid conservatism of American academies, such as the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts" (p. 54). Where the habitus occupied by Cabanel may have been arch-conservatism to the French, he occupied the position of modern pedagogue to the Americans. But how? What made his instruction so new, so modern to our Americans in Paris? Though Brugerolles does not expound on the particulars, this assertion nonetheless speaks to the importance of discussing the position occupied by an artist, an institution, or a style as constantly shifting. Unfortunately, not all Brugerolles's co-essayists follow her lead but sometimes rely on labels such as "modern," "progressive," and "conservative" to index complicated positions resisting easy summary.

The École des beaux-arts and ateliers acted as preparation for entry into the Paris Salon. For the U.S. artists discussed in *American Painters in France*, the Salon could alternately hold no interest, as demonstrated by Thomas Eakins's decision not to submit his work to the exhibition; intermittent interest, as shown by Cassatt's efforts to appease the selection committee before befriending Edgar Degas and becoming allied with the French Impressionists; and enthusiastic and longstanding interest, as evidenced by Theodore Robinson and John Singer Sargent who, year after year, successfully showed their paintings at the exhibition. Writing on U.S. women artists and their negotiation of Parisian exhibition spaces and education systems, Susan J. Rawles dismisses the École des Beaux-Arts and the Salon that, by the late nineteenth century, were "no longer the leading arbiters of art production" (p. 180). Shut out of the École until 1897 and mostly limited to decorative and small media at the Salon, women artists proceeded to form the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs. In addition to establishing exhibitions of their own, these women artists, Rawles writes, turned to "avant-garde trends," or Impressionism (p. 180). Compared with this dismissal of the Salon and its significance, flipping a few pages forward in the catalogue, Benjamin W. Colman claims the "annual Salon was the largest, most watched, and most influential exhibition of contemporary art in nineteenth-century Europe" (p. 187). Colman proceeds to detail how U.S. artists who made it big at the Salon experienced "boosted prestige and prices back home. The curators of American exhibitions competed to show works by expatriate artists in Paris who were praised at the Salon" (p. 190). But--in what non-specialist readers may read as a contradiction to the Salon's supposed importance--the foreword by Christoph Heinrich and Alex Nyerges conversely recount that, "Those American artists who absorbed sophisticated and avant-garde techniques in France met criticism back home for their failure to adhere to the widely held concept of 'American art'. Consequently, since their reception upon returning to the United States was not entirely enthusiastic, many formed strategic

alliances, organized alternative exhibitions, and sought to address forthrightly the question of the nature of American art” (p. vi). Which was it? Was the Salon influential or not? Was it important for U.S. artists or not? (The answer: all of the above.)

*American Painters* has ultimately measured the relative importance of the Salon against its response to Impressionism. To that point, Colman concludes that “as the allure of Impressionism grew, the importance of the annual Salon diminished for painters with progressive ambitions” to the point that the Salon and, in tandem, the École des Beaux-Arts “developed fusty reputations in the face of the Impressionist styles fomented outside their walls” (p. 187, 195). In thus repeating more than disrupting the story of the *avant-garde* v. *arrière-garde*, Impressionism once more occupies the position of “progressive” art. As specialist readers will surely recall, though, this insistence on the Salon as “fusty” and the Impressionists as painters with “progressive ambitions” does not account for the reality that Impressionism fomented not only *outside* but also flourished *inside* the walls of the Salons.[4] Following the formation of the Société anonyme coopérative des artistes peintres, sculpteurs et graveurs, Renoir returned to the Salon in 1878; Monet in 1880; and Sisley in 1881.[5] Their American Impressionist *confrères*, for instance Robinson, similarly showed their work at the Salon; and surely, Robinson and his Impressionism count as “progressive.” Abandoning the worn plot of *avant-garde* v. *arrière-garde* demands acknowledging that the positions of Impressionist artists (and Impressionism as a style or set of techniques and practices employed by artists outside the Société anonyme) shifted in relation to the Salon and, correspondingly, the position of official exhibition spaces and sites such as the Salon accommodated Impressionism.

Coupled with this issue in its conception of the late nineteenth-century field of cultural production, *American Painters* would benefit from a discussion of naturalism during the Early Third Republic.[6] As the paintings reproduced in the exhibition catalogue make plain, naturalism mattered to U.S. artists abroad. Surely, when looking at Childe Hassam’s *At the Florist*—with its woman in a flower-bedecked hat accompanied by a plainly attired attendant, perusing potted shrubs, wrapped buckets of multicolored blooms, and prearranged bouquets—it becomes impossible not think of Victor Gilbert’s *Flower Market* or Emile Friant’s *La Toussaint*. Shown at the 1889 Salon and quickly acquired for the Musée du Luxembourg, Friant’s queue of soberly dressed mourners proceeds past an indigent man on their way to the snow-blanketed cemetery. Indeed, Friant’s mourners could easily be imagined as having purchased their bouquets at the stand depicted in *At the Florist*.

Why not more fulsomely acknowledge the mutability and malleability of positions held by artists, styles, and institutions in the mid- and late-nineteenth century transatlantic field of cultural production? Fully embracing this more complicated tale would unsettle many audiences’ and readers’ expectations, upsetting and even overturning what they know. But doing so would also alert them to the reality that there are still more stories to learn. Though it has not entirely accomplished its own ambitious aim to push beyond the *avant-garde* v. *arrière-garde*, *American Painters* has centered U.S. artists’ varied experiences of Paris’s institutions in its story. It has underlined our subfield’s continued need to un-teach as much as teach art history.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

Christoph Heinrich and Alex Nyerges, “Directors’ Foreword”

Timothy J. Standring, “Facture in Paris”

Emmanuelle Brugerolles, “The Training of Nineteenth-Century American Paints at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts”

Suzanne Singletary, “James McNeill Whistler: a conduit between France and America”

Randall C. Griffin, “Why Paris Became the Center of American Art in the Gilded Age”

Susan J. Rawles, “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: The Franco-American Experience, 1871-1914”

Benjamin W. Colman, “‘The Great Annual Exhibition’: American Painters and American Impressionism at the Paris Salon”

## NOTES

[1] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and their Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

[2] American Alliance of Museums, “Museums and Trust 2021,” 30 September 2021, <https://www.aam-us.org/2021/09/30/museums-and-trust-2021/>.

[3] A full discussion of *facture* falls outside this review’s bounds. For a detailed discussion of this topic, see Anthea Callen, *The Art of Impressionism: Painting Technique & the Making of Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

[4] Karen L. Carter and Susan Waller, *Foreign Artists and Communities in Modern Paris, 1870-1914: Strangers in Paradise* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015). As Carter and Waller tally, non-French artists were especially well-represented at these conservative Salons. In 1911, 21% of artists at the Société des artistes françaises and 35% of artists at the Société nationale des beaux-arts were non-French. More than 1200 non-French artists were shown at that year’s more “conservative” Salons—approximately four times as many as the “avant-garde” Salon d’Automne.

[5] The return of Impressionism to the Salon has been widely discussed. See Paul Hayes Tucker, “Monet and the Challenges to Impressionism in the 1880s,” in Mary Tompkins Lewis, ed. *Critical Readings in Impressionism and Post Impressionism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 227-253; see also Marc Gotlieb, “Monet in the 1880s: Motif in Crisis,” in André Dombrowski, *A Companion to Impressionism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2021), pp. 43-60.

[6] Richard Thomson, *Art of the Actual: Naturalism and Style in Early Third Republic France* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2013).

Alexis Clark  
North Carolina State University  
[aclark5@ncsu.edu](mailto:aclark5@ncsu.edu)

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