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Toby Norris, *Marginal to Mainstream: French Modernism Between the Wars*. Vancouver and Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2023. xvii + 291 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. $120.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781683932482; $45.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781683932499.

Review by Kate Kangaslahti, KU Leuven.

In 1932, André Dezarrois wrote a review of the *Exhibition of French Art 1200–1900* at the Royal Academy in London for *La Revue de l'art ancient et moderne*, the periodical he edited. This impressive show was a state initiative promoting French culture abroad and its planning had been overseen by the Association française d'expansion et d'échanges artistiques (AFEEA), a collaborative venture between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Education.[1] In his effusive account, Dezarrois saved particular admiration for the final rooms in which seven centuries of French art culminated in the glories of the nineteenth century, and praised French organizers for placing Realist, Impressionist and even Postimpressionist paintings alongside Neoclassical and Romantic masterpieces. "Cézanne frame to frame with Ingres!," he marveled.[2] Radical artists maligned during their lifetimes now occupied pride of place in this genealogy of French art; more surprising still, their nineteenth-century academic counterparts, the *Prix de Rome* winners of the past, were conspicuously absent. Paul Léon, the Director General of Fine Arts, implicitly acknowledged this casting aside of the academic tradition when he explained the scope of the display in his introduction to catalogue: "Our portrait of French art shows its essential features, stripping it of the incidental, the contingent, the ephemeral."[3]

The selection of nineteenth-century paintings on show at the Royal Academy in 1932 reflected the growing official acceptance of progressive artistic tendencies in France in the interwar period. Indeed, as Toby Norris indicates in his recent book, *Marginal to Mainstream: French Modernism Between the Wars*, the "process of writing Impressionism into a history…that emphasized the modern tradition over the academic one" had already begun at the turn of the century, in the Centennial Exhibitions at the 1889 and 1900 Expositions Universelles in Paris (p. 7). If such early instances of state recognition were isolated events, by the end of the 1920s published histories of French painting had firmly established the importance of Impressionism and Postimpressionism. The decision at the end of 1928 to release the State's collection of Impressionist and Postimpressionist works from their probation at the Musée du Luxembourg and install them in the Louvre "cemented recognition of the movement[s]" (p. 87). Yet Dezarrois's observations about the too eager exclusion of academic artists from the display in London in 1932, Léon's need to justify those choices to the public, and the chronological limits

of the exhibition, which did not (dare to?) look beyond 1900, suggest that the victory of French modernists over their academic rivals was not (yet) complete.

How did modern art gain its first institutional footholds in France, from its marginal position prewar, when it was the preserve of a handful of art dealers and collectors, to become increasingly mainstream and, by the end of the 1950s, triumphant? And how did Paris subsequently assume its position as the capital of the *history* of modern art just as it was surrendering its role as "the most dynamic center of art-making" (p. 9)? These are the central questions of Norris's meticulous and expansive research. He brings together a wealth of examples mined from the extensive records of the Fine Arts Administration in the Archives Nationales to show that the ascendancy of modernism in France--and of Paris as its global crucible--transpired haphazardly. While French national pride was strongly linked to perceptions of the nation's artistic achievements, the State's attempts to capitalize on this *richesse* rarely followed a consistent path. The choice of what type of contemporary art to embrace--through commissions, acquisitions, exhibitions and the like--changed or evolved over time due to a number of factors, including the personal tastes of individuals in key roles. Indeed, one of the great strengths of the book is the light it sheds upon administrators who wielded considerable influence at the time but who have largely since escaped the art historical spotlight. André Dezarrois features as an exemplar of the "double career" many Fine Arts *fonctionnaires* pursued between the wars (p. 57). In addition to working as a critic and editor for his review, he also served as Assistant Curator at the Musée du Luxembourg, and Curator at the Musée du Jeu de Paume. Paul Léon, who outlasted seventeen different Ministers of Education during his thirteen-year tenure as Director General of Fine Arts, is also among the personalities Norris brings into sharp relief.

In chapter one of this chronological study, in which the author considers "Art and the National Interest in the Early 1920s," Léon emerges as an "essentially conservative figure" (p. 28). An expert in the history of monumental architecture, in the aftermath of the First World War he involved himself tirelessly in the task of preserving and restoring the nation's architectural heritage. In contrast, he took "a hands-off approach to the State's role as a patron of contemporary art" (p. 29). In commissioning and acquiring works, Léon invoked the rhetoric of pluralism, "the notion that a democratic state should distribute its support impartially among all the factions of the art world," an idea dating back to the early years of the Third Republic (p. 9). Raymonde Moulin's conceptualization of the "patron State" (*l'état mécène*) versus the "State as provider" (*l'état providence*) provides Norris with a helpful means of framing the competing agendas that characterize French investment in the arts.[4] Where the former embraces a selective policy based on qualitative judgements about the future significance of artists, the latter seeks to spread the largesse as widely as possible. In examining the choices Léon made, Norris shows that the commitment to pluralism often "masked an academic favoritism" (p. 31). If, during Léon's long term in office, the State began to purchase works by modern artists associated with either the Nabis (Pierre Bonnard and Maurice Denis) or the Fauves (Henry Matisse, Raoul Dufy and Albert Marquet), these first significant steps often "happened despite him, not because of him" (p. 28).

The perceived lack of state support for modern art in France was a source of resentment among its champions in the mid-1920s. In 1925, the art critic André Salmon praised the display of

Cinquante ans de peinture française, 1875–1925, an independent exhibition organized to coincide with the Exposition Internationale in Paris. Composed almost entirely of private loans, to Salmon it clearly demonstrated "what is missing from the Louvre and what the Luxembourg should be" (p. 67). The Musée du Luxembourg, charged with showing the work of living artists, was a frequent target of modernist ire for its perceived "hostility" to twentieth-century developments in painting, "especially Cubism" (p. 81). In 1925, the review *L'Art Vivant* led an extensive survey among artists, critics, and dealers on the need to create a new French museum of modern art to replace the outdated Luxembourg.[5] Norris has not included this *enquête*, but it might have made an interesting addition to chapter two. In the first part of "Home and Abroad, 1925–1931," he looks at attempts to rearrange the aging museum's display to "provide a [more] balanced picture of contemporary artistic production," but which necessitated borrowing key works from "dealers, collectors and artists" (p. 89). A new committee was formed in 1929, armed with a budget to remedy shortfalls in the Luxembourg's collections, but its success was limited. The pressure for pro-modern change was mounting, however, due to a "growing perception that France was failing to exploit its artistic strength as a tool of international policy" (p. 116). The rise of cultural diplomacy at the end of the decade fueled such fears, which Norris explores by examining French contributions to the Barcelona Exposition in 1929 and the Venice Biennales in 1928 and 1930.

The lack of early state support for modern art had bred a "vicious circle" in the 1920s: modern artists turned to the art market to establish their reputations; once they succeeded, "their works were beyond the State's financial reach" (p. 89). The market for modern art boomed, further underscoring a sense of "the State's artistic backwardness" whereby hesitant, official efforts "to embrace modern art ran up against…suspicion of state patronage" among artists (p. 164). In chapter three, "Modern Art and the Depression in France, 1931–1936," we see how economic crisis altered this dynamic, with the State undertaking a greater role as a patron of modern art. Political and administrative change accelerated this process: the Republican-Socialist Anatole de Monzie returned as Minister of Education and put pressure on Paul Léon to retire; Georges Huisman eventually became Director General of Fine Arts in 1934. State acquisitions--including important works by Georges Braque, André Derain and Robert Delaunay--nevertheless suggested a preference for "safer forms of modernism" with visible links to the French nineteenth-century pictorial tradition (p. 134). Norris then traces the way this modernism in moderation also inflected French displays at the 1935 Brussels World's Fair and early preparations for the 1937 Exposition Internationale in Paris.

Planning for Paris Exposition was well underway when the Popular Front came to power in France in May 1936, but Léon Blum's administration embraced the event as a platform for its policies and agenda, which included democratizing culture and lending more support to modern art. George Huisman articulated a new relationship between art and the State in June 1937, criticizing the past adherence to pluralism and contending that the State's duty was to be bold and act "as a *passionate enthusiast*" for artists who looked "towards the future and not the past" (p. 183). Existing scholarship typically emphasizes the pro-modern credentials of the new government, but Norris complicates that picture in chapter four, "Mixed Messages of the Popular Front." Memorable additions to the Exposition, with its newly expanded program and increased budget, included Robert and Sonia Delaunay's designs for the Aeronautical and Railway Pavilions, and Fernand Léger's large commission for the Palais de la Découverte. Despite this

evident openness to modernism there was still "a significant hangover of artistic pluralism," as the government sought to offer work "to as many artists as possible" (p. 204). Furthermore, acquisitions during this period were not as bold as promised and reveal the names of "regular recipients of state support before the new government came to power" (p. 221).

While the Popular Front attempted to "imprint its identity on the Exposition" (p. 184), France as host was eclipsed by the dramatic confrontation of the German and Soviet pavilions "across the main axis of the site" (p. 209). Yet these overtly propagandistic displays and the "transparently realist style" of totalitarianism's emerging visual rhetoric also served as a lesson to French observers (p. 8). In chapter five, "The Triumph of Modernism," Norris develops his argument that this burgeoning recognition of "the totalitarian embrace of realism was a pre-condition for the alignment of modernism with democratic capitalism" (p. 210). When France presented a diverse and "unbiased panorama" of its contemporary production at the New York World's Fair in 1939, the old French rhetoric of pluralism as democracy assumed a new significance before its American audience and against a background of looming conflict (p. 246). In the second half of the chapter, Norris outlines the "cultural and moral authority that the modernism of the first half of the twentieth century" consequently enjoyed in the years following the Second World War (p. 259). Historical modernism dominated the display at the Musée National d'Art Moderne when it finally opened in 1947 (under the leadership of Jean Cassou) and featured heavily in French sections at the Venice and São Paulo Biennales and in exhibitions sent abroad. The author then credits André Malraux, at the helm of the newly created Ministry of Cultural Affairs at the end of the 1950s, with cementing both "Paris's central role in the development of modernism" (p. 263) and the wider recognition of modernism "as part of [France's] *patrimoine*" (p. 264). In a short conclusion, he points to the opening of the Centre Pompidou in 1977 and the Musée d'Orsay in 1986 as securing the position of Paris as "Capital of the History of Modern Art" (p. 271).

Given its focus, the book's subtitle is somewhat misleading: a more informative choice, for example, would have been "Modern Art and the French State Between the Wars." What Norris offers is a clear, highly readable and thorough account of French officialdom's complicated and equivocal relationship to modern art, crafted from a mountain of correspondence, memoranda, reports, budgets and meeting minutes. His arguments are most convincing when based on his own primary research. Where he has relied more heavily on older, secondary literature the picture is sometimes less compelling. Nothing in the archival material, for example, suggests that André Breton was involved in the organization of the exhibition *Origines et développement de l'art international indépendant* at the Jeu de Paume in 1937, despite the inclusion of Surrealist works. Breton was explicitly critical of the final display, in which Christian Zervos, editor of the review *Cahiers d'Arts*, played an outsized role, much to the chagrin of Wassily Kandinsky.[6] The problematic 1939 acquisition of Kandinsky's painting *Composition IX* (1936) was not a laudable "moment in the official acceptance of abstract painting" (p. 214). Kandinsky had offered Dezarrois the choice of several smaller, cheaper canvases for the Jeu de Paume while insisting that it would be "impossible" for him to let *Composition IX* go for anything less than fifty thousand francs (already a 50% reduction). The artist was dismayed to receive a letter from the Ministry of Education announcing the State's purchase of the work for five thousand francs and wrote to Dezarrois to express his shock. He received a terse, unkind reminder that France had offered Kandinsky shelter as a refugee and that the curator had recently supported the painter's application for French citizenship.[7]

The uncertain position of foreign artists living and working in France between the wars *vis-à-vis* the French State and in relation to interwar understandings of a specifically *French* modernism is something to which Norris might have accorded more space. The designation of the Jeu de Paume as the State's Musée des Écoles des étrangères was emblematic of the national(ist) paradigm that prevailed during the period. So too was the official snubbing of Pablo Picasso and Cubism--unthinkable in post-1945 accounts of historical modernism. Norris does address this point in his final chapter, linking the "favor shown to ex-Nabis and former Fauves" versus "the much less enthusiastic reception of Cubism," as well as the tendency to distinguish between a "French school" engaged with the "French tradition" and a "school of Paris" comprising foreign-born modern artists, to "nationalist concerns" (p. 254). It would, however, have been helpful to discuss the national parameters that equally determined the State's approach to progressive artistic activity much earlier and in more detail. In the introduction, Norris persuasively explains his preservation of the terms "modern" versus "academic" to reflect the "institutional reality" of the art world's polarization at the time: despite the "stylistic fluidity" that existed, artists were defined as much by "their socio-institutional positioning" as by their work (p. 20). This was also the moment to spell out who or what was accepted as" French" during the period and why. This omission notwithstanding, the book makes a notable contribution to our understanding of the historical process by which France--as much by accident as by design--established itself as the birthplace of modern art.

NOTES

[1] I have retained the terms Toby Norris uses in his book for the various French agencies, institutions, and administrative positions he discusses (strictly speaking, the Ministry of Education was known in France as the Ministry of Public Instruction and Fine Arts until 1932).

[2] André Dezarrois, "L'Art français à Londres," *Revue de l'art ancien et moderne* 61, No. 332 (June 1932), 98.

[3] Paul Léon, "Introduction" in *Exhibition of French Art, 1200–1900* (London: Royal Academy, 1932), xiv.

[4] Raymonde Moulin, *L'Artiste, l'Institution et le Marché* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992).

[5] The *enquête*, titled "Pour un Musée Français d'Art Moderne," and led by the critic Georges Charensol, ran across six issues of *L'Art Vivant* in 1925, from Vol. 1, No. 14 (July 15, 1925) to Vol. 1, No. 19 (October 1, 1925).

[6] See, for example, Kate Kangaslahti "The (French) Origins and Development of International Independent Art at the Musée du Jeu de Paume in 1937," *MODOS. Revista de História da Arte* 2, No. 2 (2018): 9–31.

[7] Wassily Kandinsky's letter to André Dezarrois, dated February 24, 1939, and Dezarrois's reply, dated February 28, 1939, preserved in the Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Paris and the Getty

Research Institute, Los Angeles, have recently been published. See Jelena Hahl-Fontaine, *Wassily Kandinsky: A Life in Letters 1889–1944* (Munich: Hirmer, 2024), 240–242.

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