

H-France Review Vol. 3 (March 2003), No. 19

Annette Bourrut-Lacouture, *Jules Breton, Painter of Peasant Life*. New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, in association with the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, 2002. ??? 264 pp. I illustrations (43 b/w + 158 colors). \$65.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-300-09575-9.

Review by Nadine Vivier, Université du Maine.

Jules Breton (1827-1906) is known to art historians and specialist collectors yet hardly at all by the larger public. During the second half of the nineteenth century, however, Breton was elected to the Academie des beaux-arts in 1886, then was elected a member of the Institute, and received any number of other rewards and official decorations. He enjoyed a wide notoriety, especially in America. Then he was forgotten.

A re-examination of the Salon paintings in the 1980s has led to a new appraisal of the artists from the period 1850-1900. A number of exhibitions were held, principally in the United States, where Breton's works are better known, focusing on both the artist and the realist tradition: "Jules and Emile Breton" was held in Arras in 1976; "The French Realist Tradition" was held at the Cleveland Museum in 1980; then "Jules Breton and the French Rural Tradition" was held at the Joslyn Art Museum of Omaha (Nebraska) in 1982. An exhibition prepared by the museums of Arras, Quimper, and the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin was held in 2002. The book under review here is the catalogue to that exhibition, written by Annette Bourrut-Lacouture, an art historian and specialist on Jules Breton. It traces the life and career of the painter in a well-documented text, supported by the writings of Breton (memoirs, family papers, correspondence) and by contemporary art criticism. Breton's life in the country, as well as artistic life in France during this period, is placed in context by the use of an abundant bibliography in history and art history. The plan of the book is roughly chronological. At the end of the catalogue there is a list of the works by Breton displayed at the Salons, which is a useful instrument. It seems obvious that a catalogue for an exhibition should present beautiful reproductions of drawings and paintings. About 200 illustrations of excellent quality give the reader a good deal of pleasure.

Using correspondence between members of the family, the author first describes the artist's childhood and training. He was born in Courrières, a village in Artois, in the north of France, into a well-to-do family. His mother died very young, while his father was busy with his brewery and his duties as bailiff of the duke de Duras. An uncle by the name of Boniface moved into the household in 1831 and took care of Jules and his two brothers, Emile and Louis. Boniface exercised a great influence over Jules; the uncle was converted to the ideas of the Saint-Simoniens, and the uncle was elected "socialist mayor" of Courrières, a position he held from 1849 to 1867 (p. 60). The family was always very close; they lived together in the family house in Courrières until it became too small for the three married brothers. Then Jules moved into a neighbouring house in the village.

Jules's artistic training first took place in Ghent under Felix De Vigne (1843-1847). His relations with the De Vigne family were harmonious. Indeed, Jules fell in love with De Vigne's daughter, Elodie,

whom he married in 1858. His study under the Belgian School introduced him to the sources of the Flemish tradition and the masters of the Italian Renaissance. He gained rigour in drawing. He then went to Paris (1847-1854) to work in the studio of Drölling, also attending classes by Ingres, David, and Vernet. His artistic training was totally academic, but his early initiation to work in the open air made him particularly sensitive to the countryside, landscape, and to subjects from daily life. Breton found his inspiration in Courrières, a village devoted to agricultural activities, until the extraction of coal began in 1851. Breton never painted coal mines, not from a lack of interest in the poor but because of his attraction towards fields and their changing colours at a time when new cultures were developing: rape seed, oil poppies, flax, and hemp. This is also the reason why he painted so few interior scenes.

1848 was a momentous year for Jules. He had a predilection for the socialist theories of Louis Blanc and participated in the events in Paris. Soon after, his father died, and the family was ruined. Stirred, Jules painted *Misery and despair* (1849) and *Hunger* (1851), romantic expressions of indignation against poverty. Those paintings had the same sort of impact as Courbet's *Stonebreakers*, were considered part of the "realist school," and gave rise to a certain amount of controversy. But Breton preferred landscape. *The Harvesters' Return* (1853) showed his search of the *beau idéal* and his love of nature. In it, the influence of the seventeenth-century Flemish school as well as the influence of Courbet can be found.

From 1853 on, Breton participated regularly in the Salons. In 1855, he had a great success and won the third medal with *The Gleaners*, a scene filled with great respect for reality, which gave an impression of harmonious serenity (p. 80). This brilliant success was confirmed in 1859, when *The Recall of the Gleaners* earned the first medal at the Salon, and in 1861, when he exposed paintings of agricultural labour, religious ceremonies, and disasters (*Evening, Weeders, Rape seed Harvest, Fire.*) He was now recognised by a good number of his peers, by the government, and by a wide circle of critics. Then the painter went through a period of doubt and uncertainty, increased by the death of his mentor and father-in-law, Felix De Vigne. He had a commission for a "great painting," *The Consecration of the church in Oignies*, which encountered only measured success. He decided to look for new inspiration in the south of France. He made an excursion to Italy to reproduce the Mediterranean light. The comte Duchâtel, a former minister of Louis-Philippe and a possessor of a beautiful collection of paintings, invited Breton to his estate at Lagrange near Bordeaux to paint the grape harvest. He stayed there two months in 1862 and in 1863 and came back with studies and photographs. Bourrut-Lacouture questions the part photographs played in the process of these compositions (p.118-119), asking for new research on this point. *The Grape Harvest* pleased Duchâtel, but he was still more attracted by *The Girl minding turkeys*. The Salon in 1864 disappointed Breton: in spite of a large success, he did not win a medal. In 1865, he discovered Brittany, the shock of the beautiful light on the seaside and of the "gallo-roman type of women beloved to Michel Angelo" (p. 143). He first painted springs, water, and women (washerwomen and young woman spinning). Then, impressed by the religious character of the people, he painted *pardons* (processional pilgrimages). "He did not produce a truly innovatory view of Brittany ... but he was able to convey the thousand subtle nuances of the sea as a keen observer and talented painter." He ennobled women and "generalised" them in an echo of antiquity; he sought to give them a symbolic value that would harmonize perfectly with the seascape and the land (p. 167-170). This desire to reconcile truth and the *beau idéal* is to be seen on the canvas for the years 1870-90, especially those which encountered success, and which are analysed in the book: *The Festival of Saint-Jean* (1875), *The Gleaner* (1877), *Evening in the hamlets of Finistère* (1882), *The Song of the lark* (1884).

Jules Breton was also a writer and a poet. Encouraged by his friend José Maria de Heredia, he published a collection of poems, *Les Champs de la mer*, in 1875. The success was considerable; he was largely praised by critics and by his peers such as Victor Hugo, Fromentin, and Anatole France. He published a *rustic novel*, *Jeanne*, then his memoirs (1890), *Un peintre paysan* (1895), and few other poems: the reception was always warm. "This writing helped the painter to develop a strong and more subtle taste for landscape and atmospheric effects" (p. 193).

This double role of Breton as painter and writer increased his fame. A member of the Salon jury from 1865, he was elected a member of the Institute in 1886 and a member of the jury at the Ecole des beaux-arts. His fame was not limited to France, however, and he was also elected to institutions in Bavaria and Belgium. Commands came from Europe and the United States. American collectors became interested in European Art; the prestige of Breton, who won a first class medal in the Exposition universelle of 1867, justified numerous commands from the dealer Samuel P. Avery in the years 1870s and 1880s.

The art of Jules Breton “possesses solid technical and aesthetic qualities: it is a poetic evocation of a meticulously observed reality” (p. 12, G. Lacambre’s preface). Like great classical painters, he looks for the *beau idéal*, but more over, he combines features of both realist and naturalist traditions. He was often compared to Millet: “While Millet causes a shudder of pain, Breton expresses beautiful modelling, the peaceful, joyful side of agricultural labour” (p. 122). This is why, during Second Empire, Breton was more praised than Millet. He never had any commission from Napoléon III, but his works were bought by the government for the museum. In the following decades, he was the victim of harsh criticism from Baudelaire. In 1890 when a schism occurred in the Salon des artistes français, he remained in the conservative tendency. When Impressionists triumphed and embodied modernity, Breton’s works left Paris for museums of small towns, and then they were taken down and forgotten.

The main features of the character of Jules Breton and his family (his wife Elodie and their girl Virginie) were simplicity, integrity, and the search for justice. When Bourrut-Lacouture first describes these features, from his letters, we fear she will idealise her subject (p. 24-34), but gradually in the book, the complexity of the character appears, and we are convinced of his fairness and of “a complexity born in his lack of confidence combined with a highly developed ego” (p. 232). The simplicity remained even when honours and duties were heaped upon him. He was attached to the basic concepts of a structured society: God, the State and the family (*lato sensu* which can include the village community), a triangle to be noticed in the *Gleaners*. This does not mean that Breton’s political views were conservative. He was attached to civil rights (p. 63) and to the republican cause. It seems that he neither rejected nor sought for the patronage of Napoléon III, who never commissioned him (p. 104).

Annette Bourrut-Lacouture succeeds in giving a rich description of the artist, his life, and his works, which are precisely analyzed. We have nevertheless two regrets left. We would like to know more about the role played by Breton in the juries and his official duties. It is a worthy question for a historian of art as well as for a historian of society.^[1] We would wonder also about his brother Emile, who was a painter. They were so often together: what was their mutual influence? In the same way that paintings of Millet or a few others are shown to allow the reader to compare, we would be curious to discover Emile’s works. This would allow a better understanding of Jules’ work and his originality. Those questions reveal the interest and the pleasure given by the quality of this book, the new discovery of a painter and poet. More over, it gives to historians a better approach of the sensibility to rural life, among intellectuals, in the period 1850-1880.

NOTES

[1] A study of the Third Republic has been carried out by Pierre Vaisse, *La Troisième République et les peintres*. Recherches sur les rapports des pouvoirs publics et des peintres en France (1870-1914) (thesis, Paris, 1980). Such a study would be useful for the second Empire as well.

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