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Anthea Callen, *The Work of Art: Plein-air Painting and Artistic Identity in Nineteenth-Century France*. London: Reaktion Books, 2015 (distr. in the US by The University of Chicago Press. 336 pp. Figures (199), notes, bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-78023-355-0.

Review by Petra Chu, Seton Hall University.

For several decades Australian artist/art historian Anthea Callen has been among an exceedingly small number of scholars to address issues of art practice in nineteenth-century painting. Beginning in 1982 with *Techniques of the Impressionists* (Secaucus, N.J. : Chartwell Books, 1982) and continuing eighteen years later with *The Art of Impressionism : Painting Technique & the Making of Modernity* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2000), she has enlightened art historians, most of whom are illiterate or at best semi-literate when it comes to “reading” paintings in terms of artistic practice, on the importance of understanding the materials with which artists worked and the techniques and processes they used. Artistic practice, she would have us understand, was not *a means to an end*, but it was the end—the medium is the message, to quote Marshall McLuhan—or, at least, a considerable part of it.

Now, sixteen years later, Callen’s new book on artistic practice takes the reader back, beyond Impressionism, to the origins of *plein-air* painting in the post-Napoleonic era.[1] The book’s title, *The Work of Art*, is a play on the double meaning of the English word “work,” which refers both to the process and the product of the artist’s creative endeavor. The notion of “work” in the sense of labor is important to Callen as one of her points about *plein-air* painting is that it is laborious—a masculine rather than feminine activity. Indeed, Callen observes that, while in the later part of the eighteenth century, women artists became both more common and more prominent in Europe, the role of women in art diminished with the rise of landscape painting in the nineteenth century and she attributes this largely to the new importance of *plein-airisme*, a practice associated with long hikes, heavy equipment, sunburn, sudden downpours, insect bites, etc., all anathema to nineteenth-century women’s culture.

Callen’s main argument in *The Work of Art* is that “in the work of plein-air painters and the changes their practices effected...the real innovations in nineteenth-century painting were generated: in terms of modern artistic identity, truth and integrity, and the new attention to relations between making and meaning” (p. 9). At the core of that modern identity is the artist as (masculine) worker—*laboureur*, an identity first consciously assumed by Gustave Courbet, who surrounded himself in his *L’Atelier du peintre*, the “workshop of the painter,” with manual and intellectual laborers, and shows himself seated at his easel working, adding some touches of paint to a landscape painting with a long thin brush. In his left hand, the artist holds the tools of his trade—a large rectangular wooden palette, together with five brushes and a palette knife.[2] The knife is crucial in the context of *L’Atelier* as it was an instrument used by Courbet not merely to scrape off old paint from his palette (its original use) but also, particularly in his landscape paintings, to “build up” the surface of his canvases with heavy *empâtements* that often simulate the very materiality of the landscape—the irregular surfaces of Jurassic rocks, weathered tree trunks, or rapidly moving water. Contemporary caricaturist André Gill equated the artist’s unprecedented use of the palette knife in painting with the activity of the plasterer or the

mason.[3] His trowel-bearing Courbet wears a white worker's *blouson* and a pair of clogs, to emphasize his worker status, bearing out Callen's statement that "the work of knife painting was for the landscape artist a self-conscious reclamation of the status and masculinity of the skilled artisan painter/decorator" (p. 160).

Knife painting figures prominently in Callen's book. After an informative historical chapter on "The Origins of Plain-air painting to 1850," she moves on to a chapter on Courbet, the worker-painter, in which she pays much attention to his use of the *couteau*. Chapter three is devoted entirely to "Cézanne, Pissarro and Knife Painting." And even in chapter four, on "Colour: The Material and the Ephemeral," in which ostensibly she moves from surface texture to color, she cannot get away entirely from palette knife use. To Callan, the knife is not only central to the worker identity of the artist but also to the advancement of modernity in art as knife work calls attention to the painting surface and this privileging of surface over illusion is, of course, a hallmark of modernity. Putting it in terms of visual communication and rhetoric, Callen writes, "Rough and smooth surfaces...presuppose quite different relationships between artists and spectator. The unequivocally completed, clear and polished work of art is an act of authority, presented like a gift of declaration. The roughly finished painting, on the other hand, is more akin to an initiated conversation, a posed question, demanding an engaged response from the beholder" (p. 159). The modernity of the "rough" work lies precisely in the less declarative (hierarchical), more dialogic (equal) situation set up between artist and viewer.

While Callen's overarching argument is interesting and worthwhile, the value of her book also has much to do with the many fascinating details she presents on nineteenth-century painting practices. She explains, for example, that knife painting was closely connected with the production, by the middle of the nineteenth century, of paint in collapsible tubes. To achieve homogeneity of the colors inside the tubes, as Callen informs us, "pigment particles were kept in suspension in the oil medium by the addition of wax or additives" (p. 117). Thus paint in tubes was more "buttery" than "home-made" paints, which lacked these additives and hence were more liquid, not allowing for knife application. To demonstrate the possibilities of knife painting with the new buttery painting of the second half of the century, she presents a brilliant analysis of Antoine Vollon's *Mount of Butter* (National Gallery, Washington, DC), painted between 1875 and 1885, a painting in which, she argues, "technique and meaning inextricably coincide" (p. 116). The book also contains much interesting information on brushes, canvases and their weave, primers, colors, and the equipment of the outdoor landscape painter. It is richly illustrated with no less than 199 illustrations, most of them in color. Notwithstanding, reading Callen's descriptions of how individual paintings were produced, one wishes one could stand next to her to look at the real paintings as the very thing she talks about--the material surface of paintings--is, of course, impossible to see in reproduction.

## NOTES

[1] Callen (p. 7) locates the beginning of *plein-air* painting as a standard practice in 1817, without any explanation for that exact date.

[2] On Courbet's representation of his craft in *L' Atelier du peintre*, see Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, "Showing Making in Courbet's *The Painter's Studio*," in Rachel Esner, Sandra Kisters, and Ann-Sophie Lehman, eds., *Hiding Making Showing Creation: The Studio from Turner to Tacita Dean* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), pp. 62-72.

[3] For an image, see:

<http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-VA8PpTmMSQI/U8or6O3DgnI/AAAAAAAAABVo/y-X28Ls7Tes/s1600/189+Caricature+de+Gil+-+Courbet+en+67.jpg>

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