

H-France Review Vol. 16 (January 2016), No. 3

Amy Freund, *Portraiture and Politics in Revolutionary France*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014. xiv + 294 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$84.95 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-0-271-06194-8.

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Narratives of art history dealing with Revolutionary France commonly mention some top-notch artists—Jacques-Louis David, Hubert Robert, Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, Jean-Antoine Houdon—as well as a younger generation that emerged during the Directory and Consulate whose ambition was to elbow out their elders and occupy the front stage—Anne-Louis Girodet, François Gérard, Antoine-Jean Gros, Jean-Baptiste Isabey, Louis-Léopold Boilly, and Joseph Chinard are those most frequently cited. In spite of this impressive cast, just one generation prior, the stress was almost always put on aristocratic emigration and political repression to evoke times that were clearly not the best for the arts: indeed, Vigée Le Brun emigrated like her patrons; Girodet and Gros ran off on a study trip to Italy; Houdon kept a low profile; while Robert and Chinard landed in prison. In conservative quarters today still, the period remains an art historical field where somber depictions, ultimately rooted in Burke's critique of the Revolution as disorder,^[1] continue to be presented as self-evident. Fortunately, some scholars have instead been attentive to the creative impulse that emerged from within this troubled context and the structural impact of the revolutionary conditions on art practice during the nineteenth century. Among them, Amy Freund has chosen to focus on a selection of painted portraits from the period and an engraved collection of political actors in order to analyze some key changes and defend with great confidence “the extraordinary resilience and creativity of portraiture over the course of the Revolution” (p. 4). She explains how “ordinary people” appropriated for themselves the formerly exclusive social practice of portraiture and points to the gap between individual citizens and *le peuple* invoked constantly in political rhetoric (pp. 237-243). Her book makes the reader aware of the degree and modes of individual self-fashioning that were required for royal subjects to become full-fledged French citizens: “Portraiture, the genre most tethered to ordinary life and its contingencies, became after 1789 the form of visual representation best suited to reimagining the fundamental structures of self and nation” (p. 235).

In 1999, Tony Halliday published a ground-breaking study, *Facing the Public: Portraiture in the Aftermath of the French Revolution*, a reception narrative that details how during the Directory and Consulate, painters and critics claimed for the genre the high artistic ambitions that traditionally legitimated the superiority of history painting. In a chapter entitled, “Private life as public spectacle,” he also explored the post-revolutionary attempt to rely on sentiment to mend conflicts of opinion.^[2] Freund broadens considerably the themes covered by this much mourned art historian, who died in 2006, by also addressing the most turbulent years of the Revolution and by putting the emphasis on creative processes with stakes that were as high for the sitter as for the artist. Making the best of much new research in a thriving field and stimulated by a rich range of up-to-date historical studies, she provides a remarkably fresh account of art practice during the period, with a claim for portraiture as the visual genre that best charts the appropriation of Revolutionary ideals. The subtlety of her argument, which would be impossible to fathom within the framework of a Revolution dismissively reduced to narratives

of violence and trauma, is that radically new meaning did not always require radically new forms. Already in the 1780s many of the values that later prospered—such as naturalness and sincerity—were encouraged by liberal segments of Parisian elites. In portraits painted before 1789, Vigée Le Brun and David did away with flattering accessories and directed attention to the face and body of the sitter. Others, especially academic outsiders, took their cue from engraved models from across the Channel and presented the sitter in lush natural settings that fantasized the abolition of social constraints. Such core changes were designated in Revolutionary discourse as *regeneration*. This implied a new self-awareness that portraitists were challenged to capture: “In the portrait market, perhaps more than anywhere else, the effects, real and imagined, of the Revolution on individual subjectivity, the social order, and on the dominant visual culture were explored”(p. 25). Fueled by Freund’s empathetic attitude toward her subject, this book, although focused on the genre of portraiture in France, is probably the best introduction now available to the art of the French Revolution, in other words, to the way artistic form and meaning were reconfigured by the rapid transition from monarchy to republic. It is revealing that when dealing with the aftermath of the Terror, unlike many art historians, she never lets the reader forget that republican ideals remained the dominant political agenda.

In her introduction, Freund discusses and illustrates certain celebrated portraits of the period. The subsequent six chapters treat far less familiar imagery: paintings for example by Adolf Ulrik Wertmüller, Jean-François-Marie Bellier, Rémy-Furcy Descarsin, Henri-Pierre Danloux and Jean-Louis Laneuville.[3] When retaining works by better-known artists, she chooses to pay attention to neglected portraits, such as Gérard’s *Louis-Marie La Révellière-Lépeaux*, an impressive painting that has not been seriously discussed in nearly forty years. Such portraits are more likely to be found in regional French museums or university art galleries rather than in major fine arts institutions. Freund ennobles them by bringing rich documentary material and a wide range of critical approaches to bear on them. There has always been a tension between an art history that deepens our understanding of canonical works and one that attempts to account for a larger corpus inclusive of more artists. Freund’s move parallels the research on female artists that has exposed a number of biased assumptions and shown how fruitful a more open construction of the canon can be. Undaunted by the technical shortcomings of certain painters or by the modesty of their contemporary reputation, she forces the reader to go beyond these limitations, not only to look more closely at the works she discusses, but to reflect on the creative strategies that inspired them. She exploits unpublished and little-known letters and account books of a number of artists to apprehend the shifts in the demand for portraits and the prices they fetch: the competent academic portraitist Antoine Vestier complains that he must drastically cut his fees, whereas the miniaturist Jean-Baptiste Augustin is as busy as ever, a rift suggesting the importance of a capacity to cater to a less affluent clientele (p. 39).

When discussing the proliferation of engraved portraits of political figures, the hundreds of images of men from across the nation elected to the National Assembly, Freund evokes the consequences of this democratization of portraiture, “the multiplication of ordinary faces and bodies” (p. 75). Particularly suggestive are her observations of the way painters of National Guard portraits “load on visual and textual detail” (p. 97) and the desire of sitters to identify themselves through association with a specific revolutionary moment and action (pp. 88-89). As she writes in an extended chapter on family imagery focusing on compositions by François-André Vincent, painters sought “to make portraiture bear the weight of history” (p. 221). On several occasions, she points to a “narrative ambition” that draws portraiture closer to genre painting (p. 92). Building her arguments upon such closely-observed remarks, she defines the contours of a new conception of portraiture that discards the escapist or idealist tendencies of the genre before 1789. Her discussion of a double portrait of an elderly couple by Descarsin reveals admirably the democratic essence of the image (p. 107).

A whole chapter is devoted to Laneuville’s portrait of *The Citoyenne Tallien in a Prison Cell at La Force, Holding Her Hair Which Has Just Been Cut*, exhibited at the Salon of 1796, seen a few years ago on the Paris art market and today hidden away in a private collection. Both the story behind the image and its

elaborate iconography are exceptionally dense and benefit from a detailed discussion. Resigned to meet her fate on the scaffold of the guillotine, Thérésia Cabarrus was freed after her lover Jean-Lambert Tallien successfully plotted to overthrow the government of Robespierre (9 Thermidor Year Two ; 27 July 1794). They married in December of that year and Madame Tallien, *Notre-Dame de Thermidor* as she was known, became a fashion idol. Why two years later she wanted to publicly evoke her close call with death and how Laneuville chose to give visual expression to this desire are extremely complex issues that engulf past, present, and future. Contemporaries wary of a backlash were not inclined to completely wipe the slate of the recent experience of the Terror; though they were eager to reconnect with the frivolous pleasures of life and were on the verge of indulging in the psychological returns of Bonaparte's victorious Italian campaigns. Laneuville, a former pupil of David, contrasts dramatically the marmoreal stillness and intact beauty of the female martyr and the Goyesque gloom that envelops her. Aiming to capture the spirit of the new age that has emerged after the Terror, he acknowledges the monsters produced by the sleep of reason but continues to rely on the classical tradition to keep them at bay.

Unlike so many scholarly enterprises that defensively set up closed systems, this one suggests avenues for further research. It would no doubt be productive to put some of the ideas and critical issues that Freund articulates to work in analyzing other portraits from the Revolutionary decade and perhaps refine the notion of "ordinary" citizen by testing it against such famous icons as the representations of Juliette Récamier by David and Gérard. Portraits by Antoine-Jean Gros, recently discussed from a different angle by David O'Brien, would certainly merit similar attention with regard to the issues of republicanism that she raises.[4] It should also be possible to determine the impact of the portraits by Raphael and other old masters prominently displayed in the gallery of the Museum that opened its doors in 1793. Institutional consecration of portraits by revered artists of the past no doubt enhanced the status of the genre but probably encouraged a universalizing conception that conflicted with the contemporary orientations put forward here so persuasively.

NOTES

[1] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France, And on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event. In a Letter Intended to Have Been Sent to a Gentleman in Paris* (London: James Dodsley, 1790).

[2] Tony Halliday, *Facing the Public: Portraiture in the Aftermath of the French Revolution* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999).

[3] Indicative of the dynamism of current research on the period, studies on at least two of these painters have appeared since Freund finished her manuscript: Pierre-Yves Badel, « Du nouveau sur le peintre de portraits Remi-Fursy Descarsin (Chauny, 1747-Nantes, 1793), un talent décapité », *Bulletin de la société de l'histoire de l'art français*, 2011 (2012), pp. 37-61 (Freund generously mentions its upcoming publication, p. 253, n. 38); Valérie Lavergne-Durey, *Jean-Louis Titon La Neuville, dit Laneuville (1756-1826), portraitiste et marchand-expert* (Vizille: Musée de la Révolution française, 2014).

[4] David O'Brien, *After the Revolution. Antoine-Jean Gros, Painting and Propaganda Under Napoleon* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2006). The painter's name comes to mind since he might be the author of the anonymous (and unlikely) *Portrait of Camille Desmoulins, his Wife, Lucile, and Their Son, Horace*, reproduced p. 221.

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ISSN 1553-9172