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Neil McWilliam, *Monumental Intolerance: Jean Baffier, A Nationalist Sculpture in Fin-De-Siècle France*. University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000. lxvii+326pp. Bibliography and index. \$70.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-271-01965-4.

Review by William Hauptman, Independent Scholar, Lausanne, Switzerland.

It is doubtful that a substantial number of students of nineteenth-century French art or political history would have had even scant contact with the sculptor Jean Baffier (1851-1920). A contemporary of Rodin and other fin-de-siècle sculptors, Baffier and his work has remained on the periphery of the standard canon, neglected from both traditional art and political histories of the period. So disembodied is his work and life that only several lines are included in Bénézit's *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres*,^[1] as indeed is the case in Thieme-Becker's larger and more complete *Allgemeines Lexikon*.^[2] Curiously, nothing at all is cited in the most authoritative compendium of nineteenth-century sculptors' lives, Lami's *Dictionnaire des sculpteurs de l'école française au dix-neuvième siècle*.^[3] And even in the forty volumes of *The Grove Dictionary of Art*, but one mention of his name can be found, associated not with his extreme political radicalism but with his work in pewter, where Baffier, along with Brateau and Larche, is noted as one of the most distinguished craftsman of the late nineteenth century in the medium.^[4]

The situation is no different in recent histories of nineteenth-century sculpture, where his career is generally absent, just as his works are not represented. If it survives in this context, it does so only as a minor footnote and never as a particularly distinguished example of the multifaceted dimensions of French sculpture of the period. One of the few instances in recent times in which the historian might have had a chance to peruse one of his works was in Anne Pingeot's exhibition, *La Sculpture française au XIXe siècle*, in which a single work was shown--the *P'tit Jean le Greffeux*, first exhibited in 1886.^[5] But for practical purposes, the name of Jean Baffier has all been erased from art history.

The present study, therefore, fills a significant gap and offers a tempting array of works unknown by even the most tenacious specialist. One of the first impressions when glancing at the work itself--divorced from the text--is how singular and bizarre some of his creations appear to be. This keys with his career, which was an equally odd one, even by the standards of an age that seemed to have specialized in such oddities. But while Baffier has barely survived historical scrutiny, it should be noted that the milieu in which he worked, sculpture and the decorative arts, were dominant forms, and many overlooked artists in this period can be found. Some of these may deserve rehabilitation in the new interest in lesser masters that has emerged in the past decades, but many as well who do not merit that distinction because of the paucity of their creative imagination or the simple, and frequently local, assimilation of other styles into forms that exhibit little personal distinction. The author knows this well enough and states outright that his aim is not "merely adding one more 'forgotten' artist to the roll" (p. 3) of lost masters in the hopes that the magnificence of Baffier's work will make him a candidate for lost honors. Rather, the approach here is to employ Baffier as a pivot "for exploring a series of historical problems, artistic and ideological" by which McWilliam means a perusal of historical and political events in which Baffier the man was as much a player as Baffier the artist. The focus is steadfastly on the ideological rather than the artistic; it is as much political history as it is art history,

and accordingly there is no attempt to write a full life of Baffier, nor to catalogue his works. The book therefore addresses the art historian less than it provokes the interests of the historian, whom, I think, will benefit from the examination of the material more.

Few art historians are more capable of veering into this area than Neil McWilliam, a professor at the University of Warwick. Although known to specialists in the field largely as the compiler of a valuable and often consulted bibliography of salon criticism from the Ancien Régime to the Second Empire,[6] he also has directed himself largely into the area of the French social context that underlines the art of the period, a byproduct of his revisionist aims. Beside public talks at colloquia with such provocative titles as "Avant-Garde Anti-Modernism: Nationalism and the Search for Nationhood in Fin-de-Siècle Montmartre," and "Black Cats, Mad Cows and Golden Calves: Nationalism and Anti-Semitism in Fin-de-Siècle Montmartre," McWilliam published an important study, *Dreams of Happiness: Social Art and the French Left 1830-1850*, which enters squarely into the direction of his study of Baffier and radical causes.[7] The publication of the salon criticism sources and the radical situation of extremism in France at the end of the century has served McWilliam exceedingly well in the examination of Baffier: the former, because he has made extensive use of documentation culled from the most obscure and often unimaginable sources; the latter, because his basic understanding of French political life and its vagaries in the nineteenth century provide the tenable boundaries around which his examination is based.

There is no mistaking McWilliam's earnestness, his methodology, or his expertise in the subject. Neither can we question the accuracy of the intensive research he has brought over the years in his examination of the subject and its important peripheries. The sheer amount of documentation he utilizes and cites is itself staggering—an ocean of sources that other studies of major artists does not often contain. In the body of an introduction, seven chapters, and a conclusion, McWilliam employs no fewer than 1,026 footnotes, a very substantial of these drawn from unpublished archival sources that only the most intrepid researcher could track down, digest, and employ with intelligence. His bibliography lists about 60 national and Parisian journals and almost 20 provincial dailies and periodicals, most of which must have been exceedingly difficult to obtain and which apparently offered aspects that he could hardly have imagined at the outset of his work. In looking at McWilliam's lists of primary and secondary published sources—these make up fourteen double-column pages of bibliography—one wonders how that amount of material could have been kept in order. The bibliography equally notes Baffier's own writings—letters, manifestos, tracts, reviews, and other miscellany—as numbering almost a hundred pieces, none coming from major journals, periodicals, or standard sources. Given this torrent of information, it seems unlikely that anything on Baffier or his entourage and period, no matter how remote or obscure, could have eluded McWilliam's incredibly fervent eye.

What does this affluence of information yield? McWilliam weaves a distasteful tale of political fanaticism, misplaced patriotism, sordid hatred, and radical extremism in a long career that even included an assassination attempt on the Parisian deputy Germain Casse for which Baffier was exonerated. Most disagreeable is Baffier's fiery anti-Semitic ravings, which have the tone of modern Hitlerism. There is little doubt that Baffier's neurotic character became a dominant element in his life and like other repulsive personalities or causes used his art as a platform for these extremist ideals. But beyond the man, the art is what is most important to consider, and here we do miss the monographic approach which would have considered his sculpture as an aesthetic entity.

There is no doubt in looking over his works, and McWilliam's discussion of these, that Baffier had specific artistic merit that, despite his politics, should warrant the attention of the historian. In examining his controversial statue of Marat—it was destroyed in 1942, but the plaster cast, shown in 1883, is extant in Sancoins—the power of Baffier's image of the sensitive subject is noteworthy and could bear comparison with the treatments by David, Baudry, and others. McWilliam uses it to illustrate how the Third Republic had difficulty in coming to terms with the Revolution and how Baffier began to comprehend the latter event as a Judeo-Masonic plot, a forerunner of Baffier's anti-Semitic notions, but

McWilliam spends less time on the abstract image itself. Also, his remarkable statue of Louis XI, shown in 1884, a curious conception, shows Baffier's imagination at work as it does his technical skills, both of which can be favorably compared to more well known contemporaries.

McWilliam is especially rich in two distinct areas of his Baffier research: (1) the public sculptural programs after the Franco-Prussian War and World War I; and (2) Baffier's integration of crafts within his artistic credo. As to the former, McWilliam draws out not only Baffier's work in elegizing the heroes of battles, but also relies on those of many of his contemporaries, making a compelling case for how sculpture was used in France to elicit public-spirited ideals and sometimes in the process evoking strong emotions of Aryan supremacy. Once again, the tale McWilliam tells is sometimes repugnant, although the art itself saves it from dreary and unsavory political polemic. The statue of Michael Servetus, the Spanish doctor who was burned at the stake in Geneva in 1553 and who became an anti-Protestant rallying point, is an example in which the art overrides the political intention. In bold sculptural terms, not unlike Rodin's *Burghers of Calais*, Baffier created a distinguished figure in chains stoically awaiting his fate, a sculptural monument that seems to be as interesting without the very long discussion of its political significance.

Also taken into account is Baffier's forays into the decorative arts, inspired from his interest in medieval guilds. Central to McWilliam's chapter is the monumental fireplace shown in the Salon of 1898, "Pour la tradition celtique." It is a very odd work by any standards, showing the family as the bedrock of rural life but intertwined with symbolic caryatids, a *vielleux berrichon* at the top, and a strange relief of Vin oddly incorporated in the scheme. More commodious is Baffier's candelabras, flower vases, salt cellar—a particularly sinewy and unexpected art nouveau example—soup tureens, and wine coolers, works which in fact justified the Grove Dictionary classification of Baffier as an important decorative sculptor. These exhibit his craftsman spirit—as they do his revivalism in past decorative traditions—but again they are seen more from a social base than as works of art, considered as ideological statements rather than works of art.

It is precisely this point that produces a certain deficiency in the book, namely the importance of Baffier's art within the context of other sculptors' works of the period. Where in fact do McWilliam and later historians situate an art that moves between political proclamation, flamboyant radicalism, pure decoration, and sometimes traditional formats? The question is not easy to answer from McWilliam's text, partly because his approach is so rooted in the ideological and historical and only haplessly in the art historical in the traditional sense. McWilliam, for example, does not introduce ready comparative examples with which to examine aspects of the question of Baffier's artistic greatness or originality. While some comparisons exist in the text, they are all relegated to lesser artists (Cornu, Paris, Broquet, Pilet, Crauk, and others), which, I suppose, were selected for the corresponding dimensions of their subjects rather than as a forum to discuss style, technique, or originality. Consequently, the aesthetic value of Baffier's work, his place in the very complex picture of late nineteenth-century sculpture, and whatever influences he absorbed or emitted are not discussed or only rarely alluded to. What takes precedence, for better or worse, is the political radicalism of a few in the service of a causean element that after the events of September 11 take on a different perspective, even in the rarefied atmosphere of art history. Nonetheless, we owe McWilliam a debt in bringing out the curious aspects of this strange and sometimes squalid personality in a study that is clear, engaging, and well done. But it finally places itself in the domain of political history in which art takes on a lesser role than perhaps should have been the case.

NOTES

[1] E. Bénézit, *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Gründ, 1999), p. 632.

[2] Ulrich Thieme and Félix Becker, *Allgemeines Lexikon der Bildenden Künstler*, Vol. XII (Leipzig: Veb. E. A. Seeman Verlag, 1908), p. 352.

[3] Stanislas Lami, *Dictionnaire des sculpteurs de l'école française au dix-neuvième siècle* (Nendeln, Lichtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1970 [1914]).

[4] *The Grove Dictionary of Art*, General Editor Jan Turner. Vol. XI (London and New York: Macmillan, 1996), p. 629.

[5] Anne Pinget, *La Sculpture française au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Grand Palais, 1986), catalogue 222.

[6] Neil McWilliam (with Vera Schuster, Richard Wrigley, and Pascale Méker), *A Bibliography of Salon Criticism in Paris From the Ancien Régime to the Restoration, 1699-1827* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Neil McWilliam, *A Bibliography of Salon Criticism in Paris From the July Monarchy to the Second Republic, 1831-1855* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[7] Neil McWilliam, *Dreams of Happiness: Social Art and the French Left 1830-1850* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

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