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Margaret Werth, *The Joy of Life. The Idyllic in French Art, circa 1900*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2002. xviii + 361 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-520-22182-6.

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

The cover jacket illustrating Matisse's celebrated painting *Le bonheur de vivre* of 1905-6 in the Barnes Collection sets the tone immediately for Margaret Werth's interesting study on the theme described in the title. While the painting itself is one of the hallmarks of modern French art, its context, and particularly its iconography as a freely idyllic reverie outside of time and space, has not been studied as thoroughly as its celebrity should afford. In only an introduction and three long chapters with many sub-headings, the author explores the historical, philosophic, and social concepts of the idyllic in its many forms and guises--the pastoral, the utopic, the Golden Age, as well as myths, dreams, and fantasies of social harmony--and particularly the reasons and fashions in which these were translated into the visual arts at the turn of the twentieth century. She makes very large claims concerning the manner in which certain pictures, many of them little known or not studied in this context, can be read and interpreted as from a highly charged social period in which all forms of art and their purposes were being challenged. Ambitious, focused, detailed, and extremely well documented, Werth's study applies itself well to a new picture of what has previously been thought a rather uncomplicated problem of form and design.

The construction of the study revolves around three main linchpins that act as thematic links in establishing the philosophical, social, political, and sometimes psychological climates from which certain key works at the end of the century were painted. The starting point is Puvis de Chavannes' painting, *L'été* (Musée du Petit Palais, Paris) produced for the new Hôtel de Ville in 1891. The date is significant because the work was conceived at a time when great turbulence confronted the order of French society still torn by the events of the 1870s: the Dreyfus affair was drawing sides, anarchist bombings were not infrequent in the Paris streets, and debates continued over official and often nefarious colonial policies. Puvis' painting, conceived in his calm classical manner, and delving into the origins of order and beauty, served in effect as an aesthetic antidote to these disturbances; a reminder that art can dream and represent that which perhaps can not be lived. Related to efforts by Gauguin and others, Werth offers new understanding of these curious public paintings that rouse visions of dream-like fantasy on the origins of man and natural harmony. She also illustrates from a wide range of sources in literature, poetry, criticism, and artistic prototypes why such visions of 'melancholy wisdom,' as Mécislas Golberg wrote in 1901, touched a sensible and disturbing nerve in French art. There is, however, no word on Puvis' interest in Piero della Francesca whose Arezzo frescoes were known to him through Degas. This is important because the influence of Piero in Puvis' murals after the 1860s seems manifest, a source for the brooding, elegiac figures that people Puvis' paintings of pastoral myth.

The second chapter revolves around Paul Signac's rarely studied *Au temps d'harmonie*, a very large work painted from 1893-95 and shown afterwards in Paris and Brussels, and which now decorates a staircase

in Montreuil after Signac's widow gave it to the Communist-run city in 1938. The painting, a curiosity in Signac's oeuvre, bears the subtitle *L'âge d'or n'est pas dans le passé, il est dans le futur*, thus clearly an antithesis to Puvis' historical evocation of origins. Instead of the ethereal dreamy nymphs that populate Puvis' landscape (which Signac admired), Signac's painting is a modern scene, inhabited by workers, peasants, bathers, lovers, and others who have come together in a contemporary halcyon setting to summon and revel in the idyllic. Werth argues through diligent research and writing that Signac's painting radically rethought relationships "between artists and society; between work and leisure; between past, present, and future; between art and life--exemplifying the contradictions and limits of painting utopia in the 1890s"--heady assertions that seem overcharged, but not to the point of incredulity.

The third pivot is Matisse's *Bonheur de vivre* of 1905-6, painted and exhibited a year before Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Here Werth connects with Cézanne's bathers themes, the works of Cross and Derain, and psychoanalytic thinking, among other resources, in situating this icon as a "utopian nowhere" of "no time" (p.18). The work itself is dissected in as many fashions as possible, including a plethora of secondary sources conjuring up the *clima mentis* that forged the imagery, its composition and space, its bold, bodily sensuality, its reception, and its poetic artistic language. In this sense, Werth's exploration of the painting from such varied facets, coming as it does after having ably established the foundation, reveals a true overview of the painting and what it meant at the turn of the century. As such, it substantially contributes to the Matisse literature. Her view is sided toward social and gender understanding, which has its place in her argument, but something of the rich surface sensuality of paint surface, color, and rhythmic movement gets second place. No matter in this instance, since the latter formal approach has its interpreters and poets; Werth's reading adds to the view.

There are sensual pleasures in the book itself. The production is visually attractive with a layout that is truly reader friendly, a rarity--regrettably--in modern publishing. The paper and typography in themselves provide pleasure in touching the page and reading its words, elements that seem to be disappearing in the cost-conscious values many publishers are now providing. Moreover, Werth's prose is engaging, never lagging, and not given over to clichés that often mark such socio-political studies. Her arguments are well predicated and equitable in the way they are presented. The secondary illustrations that accompany the three chapters and the epilogue too are well chosen and well reproduced. The list of these brings together many interesting examples rarely reproduced in this type of study--paintings by Charles Maurin, Henri-Edmond Cross, Maximilien Luce, and many others, all of which situate the painterly world of 1900 idyllic painting. Werth, too, brings in enormous literary and critical sources from Arsène Alexandre to Stephan Zweig, without forgetting Baudelaire, Denis, Fénéon, Geffroy, Mallarmé, Mauclair, Mirbeau, Reclu, and scores of others. Her instructive notes, comprising sixty-two pages--roughly a fourth of the book--attest to her having deployed, one imagines, all of the pertinent literature to elucidate her points, these ranging from major studies of the past, to obscure critical data in journals, and books and articles that abut her subject.

The thematics of the book are so situated that her text should have wide interest beyond the traditional forum of art history. The historian of ideas, literature, philosophy, and society will learn and benefit from it as, of course, will the art historian who will get a new angle on an aesthetic landscape that is more complex than had been previously taught. If there are faults to be cited--indeed there are none that are major; care has been taken--they are perhaps in sometimes proving a point to excess, particularly in the chapter revolving around Signac's painting which on the surface at least holds fewer charms for this reviewer than many of the other major and minor examples cited. But Werth's arguments are stimulating, intelligent, and an example of focused scholarship of high order.

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