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Katherine M. Bourguignon, Ed., *Impressionist Giverny, A Colony of Artists, 1885-1915*. Giverny: Musée d'art Américain Terra Foundation for American Art, 2007. 219 pp. Exhibition catalogue with foreword, illustrations, essays, catalogue of the works shown in the exhibition, historical documents, map, list of artists working in Giverny, selected bibliography, index. (cl) ISBN 978-0932171-52-8.

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This beautiful catalogue, produced in a manner we have come to expect of Terra Foundation publications, documents the exhibition *Impressionist Giverny, A Colony of Artists, 1885-1915* held in Giverny, France at the Musée d'art Américain Terra Foundation for American Art (1 April-1 July 2007) and the San Diego Museum of Art (22 July-1 October 2007). The exhibition was undertaken as a celebration of the fifteenth anniversary of the founding of the Musée d'art Américain by Daniel Terra; as its current director Elizabeth Glassman states, "the history of the colony was at the heart of his [Terra's] project" (p. 12). As such it is an overview of the artists, primarily American, who lived and worked near the home and gardens of the great French Impressionist painter, Claude Monet.

The catalogue includes four essays, reproductions of the exhibited paintings, a comprehensive list of the artists who lived and worked in Giverny, and a bibliography. There is no checklist of the artists and their works included in the exhibition and the catalogue. But there is new documentation: a collection of vintage photographs from the Baudy Family Album (the family ran a local inn that was a home away from home for many artists who came to Giverny), and facsimiles of two issues from 1892 of the short-lived *Courrier Innocent*, a collaborative venture that was produced using "an early mimeographing technique" (p. 188). Composed mostly of caricatures, poems and illustrations, the sheets from the *Courrier Innocent* convey the humorous air and adolescent tone of a collegiate publication. Also reproduced are photographs — cyanotypes and albumin prints — by the American artist Theodore Robinson owned by the Terra Foundation. Unlike the snapshot quality of the photographs in the Baudy album, Robinson's photographs are staged views of his models and served as *aides memoires* for his paintings.

As is well known, Giverny was Monet's home for over forty years where he created works based on his exuberant gardens and his much heralded water lily pond. Less well known is the art colony at Giverny, a long-lived artists' retreat, comprised of at least two generations of painters who worked there from the mid eighties until the outbreak of World War I. This area of France on the River Epte near the Seine and forty miles northwest of Paris attracted an international roster of students including mostly Americans, primarily landscape artists committed to plein-air painting. Earlier artists studying in France had spent summers in Brittany and in Barbizon but came to Giverny searching for newer ideas because, as one explained, "the village is far, far ahead of Barbizon in every respect" (p. 76).

Following the acknowledgements, a preface, and a useful foreword by William Gerdtts, is an introductory essay, "Giverny: A Village for Artists," written by the exhibition's organizer and associate curator of the Musée d'art Américain/Terra Foundation for American Art, Katherine Bourguignon. As she describes it, this rural village became a magnet for young artists who arrived in Giverny after Monet had settled there as a permanent resident in 1883. What remains unclear is why subsequent generations of painters settled in Giverny. The historical record indicates that, in the beginning, their choice was arbitrary, chosen seemingly at random from a railroad map, if the testimony of one of the artists, the English born, Dawson Dawson-Watson, can be trusted. [1] Few of them knew Monet

personally and he never became their teacher, say, in the same way that William Merritt Chase, attracted art students in the summer to Shinnecock, Long Island.[2] As Bourguignon points out, “Monet was both present and absent,” i.e., although he lived nearby he did not socialize with the Giverny artists (p. 18).

After reading the catalogue I returned to older studies of the Giverny colony: Laura Meixner’s, “Claude Monet and the American Coterie at Giverny,” in the exhibition catalogue, *An International Episode: Millet, Monet and Their North American Counterparts* (1982), and Gerdts’s, *Monet’s Giverny: An Impressionist Colony* (1993). The methodology of these older studies is more traditional (and to my mind more coherent) in that their analyses are grounded, as in Meixner’s case, in a thorough understanding of the training and outlook the American artists brought to their painting in Giverny. Gerdts’s history is, in turn, a well-documented chronological narrative of the artists and their families. What the contributors to this new study offer are examinations of Giverny as place, how the ‘colonists’ responded to it, how they chose to represent it, and their experience of living there.

In the catalogue, and I assume in the exhibition, the paintings are organized thematically in a way that was also vaguely chronological: “Landscapes around Giverny,” “Village Life,” “Family and Friends,” and “The ‘Giverny Group.’” The first section, “Landscapes around Giverny” includes examples of non-figurative, plein-air painting. A stylistic exception was a work, *River Seine from Giverny Heights* (p. 99), by the little known John Howe Ireland Downes whose idiomatic brushwork and rigid paint handling reflect the artist’s familiarity with the aesthetic of the Nabis. This brings up a problem with thematic categorizations. When works of art are privileged by their correspondence with a given theme, in this case with the concept of place, stylistic differences seem no longer an issue and the lived experience of the artist is lost.

Nor were my concerns dispelled in the next section, “Village Life,” which includes a number of works that could be classified generally as genre painting and are more intimate, less panoramic views of Giverny. One artist, John Leslie Breck, influenced by Monet’s haystack series, began to create his own response to the same theme (pp 108-09)—the impact of light and the time of day on a grainstack. But Breck, and Louis Paul Dessar, brought subject matter and interests they acquired in other rural areas, such as Barbizon, where the impact of Jean François Millet is found in Breck’s *Autumn, Giverny (The New Moon)* (p. 112) and the example of Jules Breton infuses Dessar’s painting, *Peasant Woman and Haystacks, Giverny* (p. 113). Again, this speaks to the shortcoming of a thematic approach. Different treatments of the same subject matter are not accounted for nor explained. Another instance is Philip Leslie Hale’s adoption of a pointillist technique in his *French Farmhouse* (p. 119), and Theodore Robinson’s reference to Camille Pissarro in his two studies of an apple orchard in bloom. (pp. 124-25) One is left with the feeling that in response to place, the village itself, the artists all took a similar, stylistic approach.

The third section, “Family and Friends,” includes paintings of gardens and close ups of flowering plants and vegetable gardens, domestic scenes with young children, and self portraits. As Bourguignon notes these more domesticated subjects stemmed from the settlement full time of some of these artists such as the sculptor Frederick MacMonnies and his wife, the painter, Mary Fairchild MacMonnies, and Theodore Butler who married, successively, two of Monet’s step daughters.

The last section, called the “Giverny Group,” included works by the last generation of ‘colonists’ who are also referred to as the “Giverny Luminists.”[3] Its most notable member was Frederick Frieseke. While this younger generation continued to paint the now familiar scenes of the sloping farmlands along the River Epte, their subjects also included the female figure — clothed and nude — distinguished by their bright hot colors, flattened space and decorative surface. The influence of the later generation of the Nabis — Édouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard (who visited and was friends with Monet) — had arrived.

Bourguignon's essay and introductions to the painting sections left me dissatisfied and with nagging questions: Who were these artists? Where did they come from? What was their earlier training? And why were they there? I turned to the other essays in the catalogue anticipating a fuller examination of the colony. I was immediately put off by the title of Nina Lübbren's essay, "Breakfast at Monet's Giverny in the Context of European Artists' Colonies." Given Monet's curmudgeonly reputation and aloofness, it is unlikely that many of the colonists were invited to Monet's for breakfast. Since a large percentage of the artists were Americans, I would have welcomed information on the comparative experiences of these artists at Barbizon, Brittany, Concarneau, all popular summer haunts of the Americans.[4] What is included instead is a rambling account, all of it interesting, of the European artists' colonies but written with little relevance to Giverny. I sensed that this was a lost opportunity, probably due to the lack of space, for the author has written authoritatively on this subject in the past.[5]

Kathleen Pyne, the author of an innovative study of art and social anxiety in turn-of-the-century American art, [6] contributed an essay titled, "Americans in Giverny: The Meaning of Place." Once again, the concept of place becomes a slippery eel; it's there one minute, gone the next with no way to grasp it. Pyne is a gifted writer but I never discovered what point she was trying to make other than to establish that the artists embraced Giverny's "enchanted atmosphere" which had the "appeal as a place pre-composed for the painter" (p. 45). I also took exception to her claims that paintings by Willard Metcalf, *The Lily Pond* (p. 81) and William Bruce, *The Stream* (p. 80) with their "watery surface[s] often swallowing up more than half the picture.... anticipate[d] Monet's *Morning on the Seine* (pp. 46 and 129). One need only consult an earlier painting, *Regatta at Sainte-Adresse* (1867) as well as other works of the 1870s, to see that from the beginning Monet was a master of the off-kilter composition. Pyne also gets into a bit of a tangle with her analyses of two works by Robinson, *A Bird's Eye View: Giverny* (p. 46) and *From the Hill, Giverny* (p. 96) in which she attributes their design to Japanese prints. This may be the case but the one chosen to illustrate her point (p. 47) is organized from what is called more appropriately a "worm's-eye" view, not a bird's eye. Further there are other French impressionist artists to whom Robinson could have responded for his "shaped flat masses of ground [and] triangular wedges that press against one another" (p. 46), namely Pissarro and Paul Cézanne. I was surprised that in the last section of her essay, devoted to a discussion of the MacMonnies home life, that no reference was made to an earlier (2001) Terra publication, *An Interlude in Giverny*, a welcome addition to the paucity of literature that exists on both artists.[7]

I have done extensive research on French Impressionism and have written a book on Mary Cassatt who, although born in the United States, exhibited in four of the Impressionist exhibitions and lived in Paris for more than forty years. I did not recognize the Monet described by Kathleen Werth, author of an admired study, *The Joy of Life: the Idyllic in French Art, circa 1900*. [8] She writes like a dream and I was quite taken by some of her observations but her overall appraisal that Monet's nearly fifty years of painting at Giverny reflected his colonization of the area, in a manner reminiscent of the British Empire's efforts in Asia, Africa and elsewhere, does not further my understanding of his painting (p. 58) Nor am I persuaded by her assertion that Monet's art was affected by the influx of the other 'colonists,' the subjects of the exhibition (p. 57).

Given the high production standard of the publication, the fine quality of its reproductions, many of unfamiliar works, and the new material found in the appendices, I came to this project with high expectations. But the essays, loosely based on a concept of place left me with a de-centered, dissatisfied feeling. Throughout my reading I wanted more specificity on the nature of this artists' colony, how it differed from its counterparts in both the United States and France, particularly Brittany and Barbizon. Also what is missing, and this is often the case in discussions of American Impressionism, is a thoroughgoing knowledge of French Impressionism, or at least a passing familiarity with or reference to the works and careers of French painters who would have been known to the Americans working and studying in France. And if they had no, or limited knowledge of avant-garde Parisian art, then that

should also be stated. It is if the place, Giverny, in the minds of these writers was a hermetically sealed environment.

Who then is the audience for this catalogue? Certainly lovers of American impressionism will enjoy the color plates of many works familiar neither to specialists nor the general public. Students of American Impressionism will similarly benefit from this publication. But for more substantive information on the artists, what brought them to Giverny, and how it functioned as an art colony, I would recommend the older publications and the tried and true monographic studies on the individual artists.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Katherine M. Bourguignon, "Giverny: A Village for Artists"

Nina Lübbren, "Breakfast at Monet's: Giverny in the Context of European Artists' Colonies"

Kathleen Pyne, "Americans in Giverny: The Meaning of Place"

Margaret Werth, "A Long Entwined Effort': Colonizing Giverny"

NOTES

[1] Dawson, Dawson-Watson, "The Real Story," in Eliot C. Clark, *Theodore Robinson: His Life and Art* (Chicago: R. H. Love Galleries, 1979), pp. 65-7.

[2] For information on Chase's students at Shinnecock see: D. Scott Atkinson and Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr. *William Merritt Chase, Summers at Shinnecock, 1891-1902* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1987). Another excellent study of an American art colony is: Susan G. Larkin, *The Cos Cob Art Colony, Impressionists on the Connecticut Shore* (New York: National Academy of Design, 2001).

[3] See: Bruce Weber, *The Giverny Luminists: Frieseke, Miller, and Their Circle* (New York: Berry-Hill Galleries, 1995).

[4] While not called artists' colonies, there were rural retreats in France to which generations of American art students flocked. The most notable are well documented by Laura Meixner in "Jean-François Millet and his American Protégés," in *An International Episode: Millet, Monet and their North American Counterparts* (Memphis: Tenn: Dixon Gallery and Gardens, 1982), pp. 11-67, and by David Sellin in *Americans in Brittany and Normandy, 1860-1910* (Phoenix, Ariz: Phoenix Art Museum, 1982).

[5] Nina Lübbren, *Rural Artists' Colonies in Europe, 1870-1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

[6] Kathleen Pyne, *Art and the Higher Life, Painting and Evolutionary Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

[7] Joyce Henri Robinson and Derrick R. Cartwright, eds., *An Interlude in Giverny* (Giverny: Musée d'art Américain Terra Foundation for American Art, 2001).

[8] Margaret Werth, *The Joy of Life: The Idyllic in French Art, ca. 1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

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