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Ingrid Pfeiffer and Max Hollein, eds., *Esprit Montmartre: Bohemian Life in Paris around 1900*. Frankfurt: Hirmer Publishers, distributed by University of Chicago Press, 2014. 320 pages + 290 color plates. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-13: 978-3-7774-2197.

Review by Venita Datta, Wellesley College.

This collection of essays, edited by Max Hollein and Ingrid Pfeiffer, director and curator respectively at the Schirn Kunsthalle, in Frankfurt, is the catalog for an important exhibition on the “Esprit Montmartre: Bohemian Life around Paris,” held at the Schirn Kunsthalle from February 7 to June 1, 2014. As director Max Hollein notes in his foreword to the volume, while the topic of Montmartre has been addressed through the work of various artists, among them Picasso and Toulouse-Lautrec (considered in a separate catalog),<sup>[1]</sup> “a comprehensive study focused on the full social and historical context and devoted to distinguishing the myth and the legend from the reality of Montmartre has been lacking until now” (p. 9).

There have certainly been a number of important historical works on Montmartre and its place in French cultural life, among them the now classic texts by Louis Chevalier and Jerrold Seigel, as well as excellent studies by Gabriel Weisberg and Philip Dennis Cate, a contributor to the current volume,<sup>[2]</sup> but it is true that a work focusing specifically on the artists of Montmartre placed within a social, logistical and historical framework has been notably absent until now. Thus, the current volume fills an important lacuna in the field, especially in its ambition to be comprehensive. The exhibition was divided into themes (among them the topographical space of Montmartre; cafés; artists’ models and prostitutes) as well as sections (on posters; journals and magazines; the circus, along with Montmartre as an arena for outsiders and social change; and finally, the network of artists and art dealers in Montmartre). The volume, composed of ten essays, covers many of these topics, the goal being to present Montmartre life in its entirety during a time period when it, in contrast to the newly Haussmannized Paris, offered the pleasures of village life and was the center of “la vie bohème”: a meeting place for avant-garde artists and writers, as well as political dissidents—notably anarchists—and finally, other outsiders. The result is a panoramic view of the historical, social, political and artistic role Montmartre played in French life at the fin de siècle and belle époque, as well as the attraction it had for such foreign artists as Picasso and Kees Van Dongen.

Ingrid Pfeiffer attempts to link all the themes of the exhibit in the introductory essay, “Esprit Montmartre: La Bohème and a View of an Unfamiliar Paris.” The essay is informative, making a distinction between the Butte and the village-like atmosphere above it, and lower Montmartre, where most of the cafés and cabarets were located. It includes important information on the rise in the number of cafés at the time and explores artists as bohemians, as well as the role of women artists and art dealers in Montmartre. Nevertheless, the essay is disjointed and ends abruptly, perhaps due to a desire to be all encompassing.

Some of the other essays that focus on single themes are stronger. Markus Castor’s article, “Into the Mines of the Extraordinary. Montmartre: Historical Background and Topography,” is a fascinating look

at the little-known “pre-history” of Montmartre; it was not only the site of Saint-Denis’s beheading in 250 A.D., as well as a heraldic landmark in the Duc de Berry’s *Book of Hours*, but also the site of ancient Roman ruins, attracting amateur and professional archaeologists, and the location of important gypsum quarries, which provided work for its residents during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

While Chloë Langlais’s essay “Montmartre in 1900. The Social and Spatial Context of the Bohemian Melting Pot,” examines well-tread ground, the author does well to underscore the duality not only of Montmartre life but also of the view of Montmartre in the social imagination. As Langlais points out, Montmartre was always a site of religious pilgrimage, even before the construction of the Sacré Coeur, in the aftermath of the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the events of the Commune. At the same time, it was a refuge for bohemian outcasts, who, too, employed the religious imagery of martyrdom. Finally, Langlais offers a compelling reason for the departure of artists from Montmartre after the First World War, stating that if Montmartre represented an inspirational place, then “the initiating rite of passage on the Butte therefore had to involve a departure, the symbolic beginning of the period of suffering then endured by the artist martyr” (p. 74). Peter Kropmann’s entry on “Dance Clubs and Cabarets in Montmartre during the Belle Époque” also treats well-covered ground (the author would have done well to cite Charles Rearick’s important work), but the author rightly points to the multiplicity of the establishments in Montmartre, which created synergy and competition, thereby contributing to the “esprit Montmartre.”[3]

One of the strongest entries in the volume is Philip Dennis Cate’s “The Invention of Modernism. Montmartre and the Printed Image,” in which the author examines material he has explored elsewhere.[4] Here he focuses on the role of Montmartre and Montmartre artists in the explosion at the turn of the century of printed art, not only in such traditional media as the lithograph but also in the realm of the new photomechanical print. He deftly and succinctly illustrates both the links between Montmartre artists and various theaters and cafés of the time—the artists illustrated book covers and advertising posters—and the ways in which the demands of the new art form, notably the need to simplify drawings for photo mechanical reproduction, contributed to a new modernist aesthetic. The essay effectively shows how the graphic art of Toulouse-Lautrec, Willette, Steinlen and others made nonsense of the traditional division between “high” (painting) and “low” (posters) art, as well as the influence of their graphic art on younger artists like Picasso and Van Dongen, both of whom lived in Montmartre.

Essays on individual artists Toulouse-Lautrec (Danièle Devynck), Van Gogh (Nienke Bakker), Catalan artists (Vinyet Panyella), Van Dongen (Anita Hopmans), and Picasso (Robert McD. Parker) round out the volume, with a number of them presenting little-known details of the artists’ lives. As Nienke Bakker tells us (in “A ‘Man from the North’ in Paris. Van Gogh and Montmartre”), in contrast with fellow colleagues of the avant-garde, among them, Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh eschewed painting scenes of Montmartre nightlife and entertainment, preferring instead to devote himself to intimate views of rural life, including the windmills and vegetable gardens outside his window. In a similar fashion, Anita Hopman’s contribution “‘Au Haut de la Butte.’ Van Dongen’s Early Years in Paris,” recounts the Dutch artist’s engagement in French life of the time, including his intense interest in the Dreyfus Affair. Van Dongen was closely associated with such anarchists as critic Félix Fénéon and cartoonist Alexandre Cohen. Indeed, Van Dongen even published his drawings of the down and out in Montmartre in such publications as the left-wing satirical illustrated paper *L’Assiette au Beurre*. One of the strengths of the volume—and perhaps to be expected given that the exhibition was organized outside France—is the inclusion, indeed, highlighting of foreign artists since it illustrates Montmartre’s role as a magnet for avant-garde artists from all over Europe. What they took home with them after their stays in Montmartre tells us a great deal about France’s role as a center for European art at this time.

While the essays together combine to offer a multi-layered view of Montmartre life, notably, the symbiotic relationship between art, literature and commerce (which has also been well demonstrated by

previous works), as well as links between high and low culture, and the relationship of various artists who inhabited Montmartre, the short length of the essays makes the book more appropriate for the general public than for specialists. Some of them taken together would certainly be good introductory readings for students in undergraduate classes. The fact that most of the authors are not native English speakers and writers makes for a number of awkward turns of phrase and strange tense changes (which work in French but not in English), but these are minor quibbles with this beautifully illustrated volume whose plates alone make it a valuable resource for historians and art historians alike.

## NOTES

[1] Richard Thomson, Philip Dennis Cate and Mary Weaver Chapin, eds. *Toulouse-Lautrec and Montmartre* (Washington, D.C., and Princeton, N.J.: National Gallery of Art and Princeton University Press, 2005)

[2] Louis Chevalier, *Montmartre du plaisir et du crime* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1980); Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life* (New York: Viking, 1986); Gabriel Weisberg, ed., *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), and Philip Dennis Cate and Mary Lewis Shaw, eds. *The Spirit of Montmartre: Cabarets, Humor and the Avant-Garde* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 1996).

[3] Charles Rearick, *Pleasures of the Belle Époque: Entertainment and Festivity in turn-of-the century France* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985).

[4] Notably in *The Color Revolution: Color Lithography in France, 1890-1900* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, Inc. and in his edited volume *The Graphic Arts and French Society, 1871-1914* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

## LIST OF ESSAYS

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Markus Castor, “Into the Mines of the Extraordinary. Montmartre: Historical Background and Topography”

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Robert McD. Parker, “Picasso and Montmartre. Fertile Grounds for Artistic Creation”

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