
H-France Review Vol. 17 (October 2017), No. 186

Scott Allan and Édouard Kopp, with Line Clausen Pedersen. *Unruly Nature: The Landscapes of Théodore Rousseau*. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2016. xiii + 209 pp. Essays, notes, exhibition checklist, 164 color and 10 b/w illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-60606-477-1.

Review by Greg M. Thomas, The University of Hong Kong.

As Scott Allan and Édouard Kopp rightly point out at the beginning of this highly refined academic exhibition book, Théodore Rousseau (1812-67) remains one of the great understudied leaders of nineteenth-century French art. His work and reputation in the 1840s and 1850s were as innovative and controversial as Monet's in the 1860s and 1870s, and his landscape work formed the heart of what became known as the Barbizon School, complemented especially by the great figural works of his friend and Barbizon neighbor Jean-François Millet. Baudelaire was only the best among numerous art critics of the time who deemed Rousseau greater than his elder rival Corot. Yet in-depth monographic studies remain sparse: the factually precise but non-analytical *catalogues raisonnés* of paintings and drawings by Michel Schulman; my own book focusing on Rousseau's sites, aesthetics, and ecological politics; numerous articles by Simon Kelly exploring Rousseau's critical and commercial reception; a descriptive biography by Pierre and Rolande Miquel; and Amy Kurlander's recent exhibition catalogue.[1] Allan and Kopp's new book deserves to take its place among these others as a major contributor to our Rousseau knowledge base and the artist's belated redemption from scholarly obscurity.

Based on a 2016 exhibition at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, the book makes three important contributions to the Rousseau literature. Its reproductions--seventy-eight full-page color plates and seventy-three supporting figures (plus details), mostly in color--constitute the richest collection to date of high-quality images of Rousseau's work, despite the proliferation of online resources.[2] The book's five essays use expert connoisseurship to enrich and solidify our understanding of Rousseau's highly innovative painting techniques. And the authors place a particular emphasis on drawings, a rare and most welcome kind of investigation that further illuminates Rousseau's remarkable graphic oeuvre while also highlighting the importance of nineteenth-century drawing practice more generally.

The book begins with a brief but highly authoritative introduction by Scott Allan, a curator of European paintings at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, that surveys Rousseau's reputation during and after his lifetime. Providing rich context for tastes and practices of the time, including the work of other landscapists associated with the Barbizon School, Allan summarizes clearly some of Rousseau's artistic innovations, his complex relationship to other landscape traditions from Italy, the Netherlands, and Great Britain, his rise in fame in the 1850s and 1860s, his enormous favor with European and American collectors following his death in 1867, and his subsequent decline in prominence due to the dispersal of his work and the shift in collecting taste towards the Impressionists. He also dispels--once again, and with greater precision than any previous study--that nagging art historical myth that Rousseau's work was an evolutionary pre-cursor to Impressionism. As Scott compellingly demonstrates, Rousseau's work

was romantic where Impressionism was modernist, rural and ecological where Impressionism was urban and leisurely, and rooted in traditional practices of drawing, layered painting, and studio invention where Impressionism pioneered more direct painting outdoors and on-site. One can only hope textbook authors will finally abandon the proto-modernist myth, which marginalizes an extraordinary artist and obscures the distinct meanings and motivations of mid-century French art.

Chapter one is an essay about Rousseau's drawing practice written by Édouard Kopp, formerly a curator at the Getty and now a curator of drawings at the Harvard Art Museums. While modern tastes privilege the great figural and narrative drawings of Géricault, Delacroix, and Degas, Rousseau's graphic work was just as extraordinary in the realm of landscape. So it is both a pleasure and an important historical correction finally to have such a detailed and nuanced explanation of Rousseau's hugely diverse and creative techniques of drawing, especially accompanied by good color reproductions. He moved among graphite, ink, chalk, crayon, charcoal, watercolor, and gouache; worked on various types of paper and sometimes directly on canvas; ranged in size from pocket sketchbook sheets to meter-wide canvases; and experimented endlessly with tone, texture, definition, focus, and scale. Kopp notes that the great majority of Rousseau's nearly 800 known drawings (out of 1200 listed at his death) were independent of particular painting projects and his expert connoisseurship helps us appreciate how much Rousseau lived his daily creative life through these drawings—how much he used them to analyze nature, to record his vision and experience, and to exercise his imagination. Kopp also shows the reader where and how Rousseau's practice borrowed and departed from Dutch and English traditions, providing a balanced understanding of the interdependent processes of education and invention.

The second essay reverts to Allan, who shifts our attention to Rousseau's paintings. While divided into sections labeled with the nineteenth-century terms for studies and sketches—*étude*, *esquisse*, and *ébauche*—the essay emphasizes how much Rousseau's painted works subverted these traditional categories. As Kopp does for the drawings, Allan uses expert connoisseurship to explain Rousseau's experimental *processes*, precisely analyzing various materials and technical procedures, along with the visual effects that result. He defines the *étude* as a type of painting made on site to record one's impressions of a scene, as promoted in Valenciennes' influential manual on neoclassical landscape painting.^[3] Rousseau moved from traditional small *études* in oil on paper painted alongside his academic teacher Jean-Charles-Joseph Rémond (a wonderful, surprising example of which is reproduced on p. 24) to large exhibition pieces on canvas or panel that critics called *études* (rather than *tableaux*) due to their ostensibly un-composed messiness and uneven definition. Likewise, Rousseau made traditional *esquisses*—rough drafts in oil of invented compositions—but also used *esquisse* techniques like loose brushwork and unfocused blur in major exhibition works, most famously the monumental early masterpiece *Descent of the Cows* of 1834–36. An *ébauche* (section three) is usually a more finished draft of a painting in progress, but this section is the most illuminating of the three because here Allan goes into detail about Rousseau's wildly varied methods for transforming drawings and *études* into large-scale studio compositions. Drawing on historical sources and multiple technical examinations by modern specialists, he shows Rousseau layering various drawing media with oil, using different pre-primed grounds and underlayers, thinning oils, and experimenting with a variety of brushes and brush techniques. This section proves his main point—that Rousseau eschewed formulaic methods in favor of radical experimentation—and fully supports his contention that Rousseau's working methods aimed not just to represent nature but to mirror its processes: “Deeply reverent of nature, he drew analogies between the gradual, accretive procedures of painting and what he called ‘the work of nature’” (p. 37). In a final section on “finish”—that major aesthetic principle of French academic painting—he explains in detail how Rousseau's often lengthy completion times and unorthodox surface finishes drew upon English and Dutch traditions, contributed to mid-century romantic aesthetic tastes, and pioneered new modes of more open-ended painting that would resonate with Impressionism and later movements.

In chapter three, Kopp takes up the baton to overview art critics' reactions to all these dynamic new techniques of drawing and painting. This essay is a clear and meticulously documented description of

Rousseau's critical reception at the Paris Salon exhibitions, with an excellent range of quotations translated from the original texts, yet it is less detailed and less nuanced than earlier surveys of the same material.[4] While Kopp's fine visual acuity helps us see how Rousseau adapted his techniques and style to try to appease his many detractors, the analysis follows traditional art historical generalizations about "conservative" versus "liberal" artists and academic versus modern aesthetics. The more interesting point, I think, is the stark mismatch between the richly diverse techniques and effects that Kopp and Allan have demonstrated in Rousseau's works and the limited, reductive terms of reception used by the critics; Kopp's many translated excerpts demonstrate clearly that Rousseau's work far exceeded the critical vocabulary available in his day. Indeed, this book--and the exhibition on which it is based--help explain why it remains so challenging to find appropriate language to translate Rousseau's particular kind of materialism into text.

Returning to Allan's pen, the fourth chapter provides an extremely detailed study of Rousseau's picture sales throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Drawing on the Getty's comprehensive collection of old sales catalogues, Allan documents dozens of private exhibitions, sales, and auctions of Rousseau's work, including specific histories of many individual paintings and buyers, to illustrate the artist's integral role in what he calls "the first major market bubble in the history of modern art" (p. 59). He explains that Rousseau's rise in reputation in the 1850s coincided with the blooming of art auctions by major private dealers who were creating a new economy of art investing, with the pioneering Durand-Ruel making Rousseau one of his major artists. Meticulously tracing prices and transactions, he shows that Rousseau attracted high prices and investment interest within France in the 1850s and 1860s, gradually spreading to other European countries before exploding in the United States in the 1880s, where collectors bought up some of his most important and valuable works. Allan notes too that Rousseau's unorthodox drawings and studies, while valued by artists and connoisseurs, were never as highly valued in the market as his exhibition pieces, and that investment interest in all his work declined in the early 1900s.

The book ends with a brief essay by Line Clausen Pedersen, curator of Danish and French art at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, who writes in detail about one of Rousseau's grandest and most mysterious works, *Mont Blanc Seen from La Faucille, Storm Effect*. Rousseau began this monumental eight-foot canvas in 1834, based on a three-month stay at La Faucille, a tiny pass in the French Jura mountains overlooking Geneva and the Alps beyond, but he kept reworking it until his death without ever exhibiting it. Pedersen recounts its odd history but devotes most of the essay to detailed description of the painting and the technical evidence for its production. Pointing out areas of varied paint thickness, diverse application techniques, scraping and intense reworking, and damage from repeated rolling and unrolling, she illustrates with unprecedented vividness Rousseau's almost manic habit of perpetual, non-linear creation and destruction, which parallels in some sense the picture's motif of an alpine storm alternately obscuring and illuminating the remote, ideal peak of Mont Blanc.

There is one missed opportunity here: the book does not provide a proper catalogue of the works in the original exhibition. The exhaustive exhibition checklist does document the provenance, exhibition history, and critical and scholarly references for each of the seventy-eight exhibited works in extraordinary detail, making it the definitive source of historical information for these works. But there are no narrative catalogue entries to explain a work's site and motif, or its commission or reception, or to provide broader historical or contextual analysis. Works are just mentioned as examples within the essays, without much historical background. For a neglected artist like Rousseau, this means the works remain difficult to access, to put together into a coherent oeuvre with perceivable patterns of meaning and development.

Other than this one drawback, however, the book is an exciting and indispensable addition to Rousseau scholarship, and to nineteenth-century art historical literature more generally. Erudite yet readable, it offers an unusually profound examination of a nineteenth-century artist's working methods, richly

detailed case studies of nineteenth-century art criticism and collecting, and the definitive bibliography on Rousseau, including extensive sources on French landscape more generally. As the book does not seek to contextualize Rousseau and his work in the broader history of 19th-century travel, rural development, science, or philosophy, it may have limited appeal to scholars outside art history. But for art historians, it is an essential pillar in building our understanding of mid-century French landscape and a model of the special knowledge that can be gained by outstanding technical analysis backed by exhaustive textual documentation.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Scott Allan, "Introduction"

Édouard Kopp, "Lines of Inquiry: Rousseau's Drawings"

Scott Allan, "'A Method Matters Little': Rousseau's Working Procedures as a Painter"

Édouard Kopp, "Facing Criticism: Rousseau and the Salon"

Scott Allan, "Rousseau's Market, 1830-1914"

Line Clausen Pedersen, "Rousseau's Storm over Mont Blanc"

NOTES

[1] Michel Schulman, *Théodore Rousseau, 1812-1867*, 2 vols. (Paris: Editions de l'Amateur, 1997-1999); Greg M. Thomas, *Art and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century France: The Landscapes of Théodore Rousseau* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); numerous articles by Simon Kelly listed in the bibliography to the book under review; Pierre and Rolande Miquel, *Théodore Rousseau, 1812-1867* (Paris: Somogy, 2010); and Amy Kurlander, *The Untamed Landscape: Theodore Rousseau and the Path to Barbizon* (New York: Morgan Library and Museum, 2014). All the Rousseau literature depends fundamentally on the detailed biography by Rousseau's friend Alfred Sensier: *Souvenirs sur Th. Rousseau* (Paris: Léon Techener, 1872).

[2] For numerous works, the illustrations here are the first to reproduce them in color or in any large-scale legible format. The plates of exhibited works do not include many of Rousseau's most important works, but most of those are reproduced—in color—in the supporting illustrations (with the notable exception of the Metropolitan Museum's iconic *Forest in Winter at Sunset*). While a few of the plates seem too dark relative to the original paintings, high quality details offer especially good approximations of the works' material richness.

[3] Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes, *Éléments de perspective pratique, à l'usage des artistes, suivis de réflexions et conseils à un élève sur la peinture, et particulièrement sur le genre du paysage* (Paris, an VIII [1800]), 2nd ed. Paris: Aimé Payen, 1820.

[4] The first such survey, cited but not discussed, was an important essay by Prosper Dorbec, "L'oeuvre de Théodore Rousseau aux Salons, de 1849 à 1867," *Gazette des beaux-arts*, 4th ser., vol. 9, no. 668 (Feb. 1913), 107-27.

Greg M. Thomas
The University of Hong Kong
gmthomas@hku.hk

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172