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Charlotte Foucher Zarmanian, *Créatrices en 1900: Femmes artistes en France dans les milieux symbolistes*. Paris: Éditions mare & martin, 2015. 358 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. 37.00€. (pb). ISBN 979-1-0920-5447-7.

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In her detailed and comprehensive study of women artists active in the French Symbolist movement, Charlotte Foucher Zarmanian seeks to draw attention to not one, but two neglected aspects of fin-de-siècle artistic production: women artists and Symbolism itself.^[1] Zarmanian's study joins other recent publications such as Michelle Facos's *Symbolist Art in Context* and Patricia Mathews's *Passionate Discontent: Creativity, Gender, and French Symbolist Art* in asserting Symbolism's key place within the historical trajectory of Modernism.^[2]

Créatrices en 1900 is an edited and abridged version of Zarmanian's doctoral dissertation, which she defended at the Université de Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne in 2012. The recipient of the prestigious Prix du musée d'Orsay in 2013, Zarmanian's study provides a long-awaited overview of women artists' role in the Symbolist movement and carefully documents the pressures and limits that shaped the careers of nineteenth-century women artists more generally. The result is a book that functions on two slightly disparate registers: as a broad survey of women artists with ties to the Symbolist movement and as a kind of institutional history of the art world in fin-de-siècle Paris. Yet Zarmanian unites these two histories by positing that Symbolist artists' fascination with the idea of "Woman" as both femme fatale and ideal mother constituted a direct response to widespread cultural anxieties around changing gender roles.

Zarmanian's study examines the period 1880-1914, with a brief discussion of the years immediately following World War I.^[3] *Créatrices en 1900* focuses on artists working in France, but due to Paris's status as an international center for artistic training in the nineteenth century, also includes a number of artists from Scandinavia, Britain, and the United States. Approximately sixty artists in all, many of them largely unknown outside of specialist circles, provide a thorough documentary background against which Zarmanian highlights the parameters of professional practice in fin-de-siècle France. *Créatrices en 1900* is abundantly illustrated with many lesser-known works, including images from the popular press, many of which merit closer scrutiny. In her analysis, Zarmanian draws on an incredibly rich and broad range of sources, including Salon catalogs, feminist journals, art criticism, artists' writings, and archival sources, as well as a variety of secondary writings drawn from the fields of cultural studies, philosophy, and art history.

Zarmanian limits her choice of artists to those whose work reflects what she terms *l'esthétique symboliste*. Although she avoids defining this phrase in precise terms, such openness reflects the vaguely defined limits of Symbolism itself. Not a cohesive movement per se, Symbolism was primarily a literary and artistic phenomenon that, in the words of Jean Moréas, "seeks to clothe the Idea with a sensible form."^[4] Thus Zarmanian's account also dwells briefly on artistic schools and tendencies that overlap

with Symbolism, including Art Nouveau, the Arts and Crafts Movement, and even Surrealism. The way in which Symbolism has historically been defined through reference to subject matter, however, somewhat limits Zarmanian's ability to analyze deeper affinities between works produced in these different contexts. Zarmanian nonetheless creates a strong link between these disparate and varied artworks through her consistent focus on the professional conditions that shaped their making.

Zarmanian's purpose in writing *Créatrices en 1900* emerges clearly in her introduction: to uncover a history that has been hidden and to correct what she views as a historiographical injustice. References to the idea of a buried history abound, from the title of her opening chapter, "Un symbolisme enfoui," to Zarmanian's description of her project as "ce vaste travail d'exhumation" (p. 20). Although Zarmanian's aim seems to reflect a certain historical positivism, she situates her work carefully and thoughtfully in relationship to existing feminist scholarship in art history.

Indeed, one of the strengths of Zarmanian's study is the way in which it seeks to reconcile two parallel, but often conflicting scholarly traditions by drawing on the work of both Anglo-Saxon and Francophone historians, cultural critics, and art historians. Zarmanian acknowledges her debt to the work of Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock, and other feminist scholars, even as she contends that early efforts to write a history of women artists often decontextualized their subjects and resulted in their continued marginalization. In contrast, Zarmanian seeks to integrate the stories of women artists into their historical and cultural context. While art historians such as Pollock studied mechanisms of exclusion, Zarmanian focuses on women artists as active agents in the shaping of their own professional identities. Indeed, she structures her study around the idea of what she terms "*stratégies*," or means by which women artists sought to gain entrance to the male-dominated artistic sphere.

Prostitutes, lesbians, menopausal women, and hysterics... Zarmanian opens her study with a wide-ranging discussion of just how deeply the idea of artistic creativity and beliefs about women's sexuality were linked in the fin-de-siècle popular imagination. To make her case, Zarmanian looks to scientific and medical treatises by the likes of Cesare Lombroso, detailing the ways in which such sources emphasized women's mental inferiority. As Zarmanian notes, the cerebral nature of Symbolism, or its *idéisme*, in the words of critic Gabriel-Albert Aurier, seemed to many contemporaries to be incompatible with woman's fundamentally anti-intellectual nature.

It is in this context that Zarmanian's choice of title, *Créatrices en 1900*, is significant—for contemporary scientific and medical discourse posited that women were capable only of reproduction, in the sense of both artistic imitation *and* procreation, not of innovation. In what follows, Zarmanian traces the ways in which caricatures and satirical writings in the popular press continuously linked the themes of sex, reproduction, and even orgasm to art-making, creativity, and invention, thus mapping biological metaphors onto the process of artistic production. Women artists appear in these sources as pathological, excessively masculine, or even desexualized, suggesting that creativity could be achieved only at the cost of reproductive fertility.

Zarmanian notes that many women artists and feminists (she sometimes conflates the two) sought to reappropriate terms such as "*le bas-bleu*" ("bluestocking," p. 65), essentially recoding them as positive celebrations of female creativity. Nonetheless, even roles such as "*la dompteuse*" ("lion tamer") were vulnerable to sexualized associations that recast them in the guise of the femme fatale. Thus contemporary caricatures and literary satires, she argues, crystallized fears related to the "New Woman," a concept most famously explored by Debora Silverman in her work on Art Nouveau and here linked to the birth of the feminist movement in France.[5]

In the first half of *Créatrices en 1900*, then, Zarmanian carefully lays the groundwork for an understanding of the barriers that faced women artists, establishing not only why women artists were

excluded from Symbolism and its histories, but *how*. The second, longer section of her book details the disparate strategies employed by women artists to circumvent these limitations.

Foremost among these strategies were those that sought to turn weaknesses into strengths. Some women artists drew on their artist-spouses' powerful contacts and professional networks to gain access to the art world, Zarmanian posits, while others worked in feminized genres such as the decorative arts. Others adopted an aesthetic borrowed from Art Nouveau or the Arts and Crafts Movement, profiting from the association of women with the decorative. Even within these movements, however, Zarmanian notes that women's contributions often went unacknowledged, as workshop-based practices in particular emphasized anonymity. Zarmanian labels these efforts a "*stratégie de la convenance*" (p. 94), highlighting the ways in which they reinforced existing stereotypes rather than challenging them.

Zarmanian goes on to discuss what she terms a "*stratégie de la délégation*" (p. 132). This section provides the most original and striking aspect of her study, for in it she links Symbolist art directly to the Spiritualist Movement. Identifying what she terms a "*féminisme spiritualiste*," Zarmanian argues that female mediums not only incorporated artistic production into their spiritualist practices, but also avoided censure by delegating their creative authority to the spirit who guided them. While the Symbolist and Spiritualist movements shared a common fascination with the Occult, however, she acknowledges that the link between the two was, at times, tenuous. As Zarmanian observes, professional mediums such as Moina Mathers (née Annie Horniman) often had to choose between following their spiritual calling and lending their art greater visibility outside of Spiritualist circles.

Zarmanian's third category of professional strategies employed by women artists relies on two case studies that are pivotal to her argument. The actress, painter, and sculptor Sarah Bernhardt and the writer, sculptor, and art critic Judith Gautier, she argues, each employed a strategy of "*pluridisciplinarité*" to advance their artistic careers (p. 170). By casting their highly accomplished artistic production as the product of a talented amateur, Zarmanian suggests that Bernhardt and Gautier were able to turn prevailing assumptions about female dilettantism to their own advantage. Taking Joan Rivière's idea of the "*mascarade*" (p. 79) as her cue, she further identifies forms of camouflage employed by Bernhardt, Gautier, and other women artists, including cross-dressing, the use of a male pseudonym, and even the invention of a new surname.^[6] Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Zarmanian remarks upon the dual nature of these acts, which at once deflect attention away from the potentially threatening identity of these artists as women and yet also provocatively place the very idea of gender in question. This attention to gender's performative aspects, however, remains in some tension with the author's more essentializing efforts to identify ways in which women artists' treatment of the female form differed consistently from that of male artists (pp. 221, 235).

The final strategy addressed by Zarmanian is what she terms "*légitimisation*" (p. 188). Through an in-depth discussion of the educational opportunities open to women artists at the end of the nineteenth century, the author delineates several possible paths to professional success. These included not only independent schools such as the Académie Julien, but also the studios of academic artists who accepted female students, such as Eugène Carrière. For some women artists from more affluent backgrounds, such as the Dutch sculptor Sara Sward, Zarmanian notes that patronage provided a means of entry into the artistic sphere. The proliferation of alternative exhibition venues such as the Salon de la Rose + Croix also permitted more women to exhibit their work. Zarmanian suggests that such strategies of legitimization amounted to an effort to subvert the male-dominated academic system from the "inside." Through a sly parroting of the prevailing misogyny, she argues, women gained entry into the art world of fin-de-siècle France—and profoundly transformed it in the process.

Zarmanian ends her account with a brief foray into the period following World War I, suggesting ways in which the strategies of masquerade, camouflage, and subversion continued to characterize women artists' efforts to achieve professional success. She thereby underscores the ongoing necessity of such

strategies, identifying a persistent backlash against feminism's gains, while also establishing a legacy for Symbolism itself. In this way, Zarmanian posits that the women artists of the Symbolist movement, like their feminist counterparts in the political sphere, laid the groundwork for the advances of women artists in the twentieth century.

Despite the clear contribution that Zarmanian makes to both feminist art history and the study of nineteenth-century art, she faces several difficulties in reconciling her stated aims with the need to compose what is essentially the first serious study of her subject. Zarmanian notes early on in *Créatrices de 1900* that she seeks to avoid compiling a series of monographic studies, but there are moments when her effort to bring to light forgotten artists, in the absence of a sustained analysis of their work, necessarily entails sacrificing depth for breadth. One of the potential pitfalls of seeking to recover the histories of lesser-known artists is also the risk that their work may seem undeserving of study. Thus Zarmanian's consistent efforts to link women artists to the Symbolist movement through comparison of their work with that of better-known male artists risks defining the movement through the work of its male proponents, while unintentionally suggesting the derivative nature of works by women artists.

Zarmanian addresses this thorny issue of influence head-on, however, arguing that attempts to evaluate the quality of works produced by women artists using the work of male artists as a standard lead to an impoverished reading of their art. While the notions of influence, emulation, and appropriation are necessary in order to establish artists' place within the Symbolist movement, she writes, it is nonetheless important to interrogate, circumvent, and move beyond them.[7]

In conclusion, what *Créatrices en 1900* provides the reader is a meticulously researched and invaluable archive, one that will enable scholars to explore works by these artists in more detail. The book thus stands as an important first step towards a deeper understanding of Symbolism's place in the history of Modernism, as well as a richer comprehension of the challenges that faced women artists at the end of the nineteenth century. Perhaps the greatest strength of Zarmanian's significant addition to the literature on Symbolism, moreover, is the way in which she presents the experiences of women artists in the Symbolist movement as key to understanding a pivotal moment in the history of the women's rights movement. By clearly delineating the ties between artistic practice and feminist politics, Zarmanian brings a keen eye to bear on this moment of complex historical transformation, a moment that would have profound repercussions on the lives of twentieth-century women--and women artists.

NOTES

[1] Charlotte Foucher Zarmanian received her Ph.D. from the Université de Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne in 2012 and is currently *chargée de recherches* at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and affiliated with the Laboratoire d'études du genre et de sexualité (LEGS) and with InTRulab at Université François-Rabelais in Tours. She has served as an H-France review editor since 2015. It should be noted that Zarmanian prefers the term "Symbolist milieu" to "Symbolist movement," arguing that the former underscores the decentered nature of Symbolism.

[2] Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009) and Patricia Mathews, *Passionate Discontent: Creativity, Gender, and French Symbolist Art* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999). See also Claire I. R. O'Mahony, ed., *Symbolist Objects: Materiality and Subjectivity at the Fin-de-Siècle* (High Wycombe: Rivendale Press, 2009) and Michelle Facos and Thor J. Mednick, eds., *The Symbolist Roots of Modern Art* (Surrey, England and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2015).

[3] Zarmanian refers to this period as the *tournant du siècle*, or turn of the century, rather than the *fin de siècle*, thus marking the profound social and cultural transformations that characterized this era.

[4] Jean Moréas, "Symbolism--a Manifesto," in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Jason Gaiger, eds., *Art in Theory 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1998), p. 1015.

[5] Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989).

[6] Joan Rivière, "Womanliness as Masquerade," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10(1929): 303-313.

[7] As Zarmanian explains: "À l'aune d'une réflexion où il s'agit d'intégrer a posteriori les femmes artistes au mouvement symbolisme, il est nécessaire d'utiliser ces notions d'influence, d'émulation, d'appropriation, tout en sachant les interroger, les contourner, et les dépasser. Sans se laisser enfermer par le seul critère, trop subjectif et finalement peu pertinent, de la qualité des œuvres produites par ces femmes, il est important de savoir passer outre cette logique déterministe risquant d'aboutir à une réduction et à un appauvrissement de leurs productions, mais aussi à une forme d'acceptation de la domination des artistes masculins. La voie la plus intéressante serait dès lors de procéder, de façon plus constructive, à l'intégration des œuvres dans un contexte précis et avançant plutôt par comparaisons, affinités ou proximités esthétiques" (p. 216).

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