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Alison McQueen, *The Rise of the Cult of Rembrandt. Reinventing an Old Master in Nineteenth-Century France*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, distributed in the US by the University of Chicago Press, 2003. 388p. bibliography and index. \$55.00 (US). ISBN 90-5356-624-4.

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

How eminent artists of the past came from relative obscurity to revered Old Master status is always a fruitful historical inquiry. Such studies illustrate the truth of history as a sometimes precarious discipline in which the authenticity of the facts is conditional on a variety of indeterminate conditions. Our concept of art's historical veracity is constrained by what is discovered, when, and then how, these facts, documents, or paintings are interpreted in the social or historical circumstances from which new assessments are made. It is a binding truth that historical evaluation is an ongoing process, mutable according to new discoveries or reappraisals. Nineteenth-century France was a cauldron of such ideas, particularly in regard to the past masters, as is made evident in the plethora of episodes from the lives of the early painters depicted or described in the visual arts and literary texts. This research into the past produced abundant artistic rediscoveries, ranging from the Italian and Flemish primitives to the Louis and Antoine Le Nain, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, Jan Vermeer, Sandro Botticelli, Giorgione, and others, all providing new impetus for the fluid process of historical reconstruction. In each of these cases, such discoveries were given new meaning within an historical context, which inevitably overturned accepted standards of taste, quality, and collecting habits and thereby provided the canons with which we now judge the pillars of anterior masters.

Alison McQueen's text considers these points as a pivotal foundation in assessing the degree to which the towering reputation of Rembrandt was in fact formed in France in the essential years after 1830, a reputation that is the keystone of his extraordinary stature today. As McQueen points out, more than 150 publications on Rembrandt were recorded in the French press in only several decades, ranging from scholarly texts and catalogues to vaudeville. McQueen seems to have digested them all, from which she has fashioned five solid chapters that relate different aspects of the Rembrandt revival and then what came to be a cult built around the image of the painter. These chapters examine in careful detail how Rembrandt's biography was deftly reinvented; how he became the exemplar for new aesthetic visions; how his art and life became fodder for other artistic representations; and how Rembrandt became a prototypical icon of the bohemian cast aside by an insensitive society. These tales, based on acute and convincing evidence explained with freshness and perceptiveness, are spun with very lucid wisdom and discourse, perfectly pitched so that the historian of art and of ideas can well benefit from the wealth of information she provided.

The section dealing with the major French writers on Dutch art--Arsène Houssaye, Alfred Michiels, Charles Blanc, and later Louis Viardot Thoré-Bürger and Eugène Fromentin--are particularly incisive and paragons of succinctness. In discussing how these writers built the essential elements of the Rembrandt revival, McQueen presents a rounded picture of a new appreciation in which northern art began to take on an aesthetic equality with Italian art, with Rembrandt as its leading light. Her understanding of how a cult status began to develop, too, is extremely well demonstrated, impregnated not only by his art but his persona and supposed psychological makeup, which, as she explained sometimes took on the proportion of "soap opera-like narratives" (p. 57). McQueen's text is particularly commendable in cataloguing the dozens of works, many from minor masters, which depicted fictional or real aspects of Rembrandt's life, a tour-de-force exposition which adds to the base established in Francis Haskell's pioneering study, "The Old Masters in Nineteenth-Century French Painting," published in 1971.

Also remarkable is the last large section, which analyzes the importance of Rembrandt's prints within French cultural circles. Her appreciation of the graphic works is evidence of the author's cultured eye, drawing analogies with the Barbizon printmakers, among others, and seeing these as impetus for the foundation of the Société des Aquafortistes. Most important is her discussion of the acquisition of print collections in which Rembrandt's works were especially prized. Many familiar names appear in her explanation of how critics saw these --Gautier, Burty,

Braquemond--but McQueen's perceptive research is very informative in clarifying influence and appreciation, and where and when his graphic works were displayed and then purchased.

McQueen's discerning text of how Rembrandt's work achieved this high status comes to a crest with an examination of a popular play staged at the Nouveau Théâtre in October, 1898, precisely when the first retrospective of Rembrandt's work was mounted in Amsterdam. The play reenacted many of Rembrandt's pictures in *tableaux vivants*, but the gist was a summary of how the painter was viewed as an independent genius misunderstood by an unenlightened population, literally, the synthesis of how Rembrandt became the paradigmatic painter of his and our own times. With dramatic license common for the times, the play stressed how Rembrandt used common models and went from precise rendering to sketchy diffusion. The play, too, explored the poetic domain of individual suffering, financial ruin, and misunderstanding--in other words, the image of the solitary artist in continuous struggle with the forces of officialdom and bourgeois tastes.

McQueen's study was, I think, not an easy one to produce, since the sources are not always evident and the writing could have easily bogged down into stark documentation. This is not the case, and, indeed, the writing flows without jingoism or labored prose, even when using the first person form. The book is very fine art history in a broad sense, scientifically based on extensive research clearly distilled after reflective thought on the multitude of sources. Some 574 notes are witnesses of diligence, even though, at times, they are a bit grandiloquent. One note, for example (n° 507), spans two pages in four columns, detailing prints after artists' works exhibited in Paris from 1843 to 1900, a luxury of useful information but not a necessity. I am certain that certain Rembrandt specialists might find areas of doubt, or question whether the Dutch, German, or English appreciation should not also be considered fundamental, but from what is on the page, the book a solid, readable, and a noteworthy addition to the literature. It adds measurably to our understanding of how a major painter came to define the icon of painterly genius.

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