

May 24, 1981

PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

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ROSA BONHEUR A Life and a Legend. Text by Dore Ashton. Illustrations and Captions by Denise Browne Hare. 206 pp. New York: A Studio Book/The Viking Press. \$20.

POPULAR trends in taste and ideas have made many a career, though when the vogue dies, obscurity follows. But Rosa Bonheur, both in this century and the last, has succeeded in defying convention and the odds. From her 19th-century audience, "RB," as she was known to her contemporaries, received fame and financial rewards by catering to its particular enthusiasm for paintings based on direct and detailed observation of nature and the sentimental depiction of animals. And now Bonheur is brought to the public's attention again for reasons that have little to do with the original cause of her fame. Indeed, few 20th-century sensibilities are equipped to see her pictures as anything other than quaint amusements. Bonheur's reappearance on the cultural scene is the result not of fashions in art but in politics. She is the beneficiary of a general interest in the reassessment of social history that has been stimulated by the women's movement. Today we take notice of RB because in her time she was an anomaly: a successful and selfdirected female artist.

When she was born in Bordeaux in 1822, Rosalie Bonheur fit one stereotype of the female artist - she was the daughter of a painter. Her upbringing was an unusual one, as Dore Ashton describes it. Her father, Raimond Bonheur, had become a follower of the French social philosopher Saint-Simon (among whose tenets was a belief in the equality of the sexes), and Bonheur's unconventional ideas had considerable impact on his daughter's development. Thus, after an abortive attempt to apprentice her to a dressmaker, Rosa was trained by her father as an artist, first working only with pencils, copying plaster casts in his studio, then making copies in oil of the masters at the Louvre. Later, Bonheur Pere would introduce his daughter to the Romantic musing of l'Abbe Lammenais, who exhorted artists not to try to reproduce nature but to "recapture in themselves the palpitating life ... which animates their work as the spirit of God animates and fills the universe."

To this hybrid of academic conventions and vague utopian ideals, Rosa added an interest of her own, one which seems more suited to the girl we see in the pictures that illustrate the book. This solid, earthy young woman with the cropped hair and serious expression was passionately attracted to the natural world, especially to animals. Through her father, RB met the celebrated French scientist Etienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and was allowed to wander in his zoological gardens. When Rosa first exhibited at the annual Paris Salon at the age of 19, she showed paintings that reflected what would be a lifelong obsession with beasts of all forms. Her oil painting of rabbits and a drawing of goats and sheep attracted immediate response and established RB's reputation.

Within a few years, she was winning medals and commissions, and enjoying enormous success. Until the end of her life in 1899, Rosa lived comfortably in the financial security that had eluded her parents - an economic freedom that was due in large measure to the wisdom of her dealer, Ernest Gambart. The clever Gambart pioneered the concept of subsidiary rights, and under his direction Rosa earned considerable sums, not only from the sale of her pictures but from copyrights held on reproductions of her work. With this affluence, RB created a world well suited to her own special passions at the Chateau de By near Fontainebleau, an establishment that was simultaneously studio, hunting lodge and game preserve. Denise Browne Hare's photographs of the house - which is now restored and open to visitors - are marvelously evocative.

But a shadow falls across this tale of glory and monetary gain, for the paintings illustrated here are disconcertingly vapid. Though Miss Ashton's text tries valiantly to put the work of this best known of animaliers into context, perhaps it is inevitable that a modern viewer should fail to appreciate an image that a 19th-century critic valued because it was "painted just as I would like to be painted if I were a dog." But the problem surely lies deeper, and Miss Ashton only begins to contend with it in her best chapter, an analysis of "The Horse Fair."

"The Horse Fair" is Bonheur's acknowledged masterpiece. Today, despite - or because of - its theatricalism, its overstuffed splendor, the painting still produces a rush of excitement when one approaches it in the Metropolitan Museum's Andre Meyer Galleries. It is a turbulent scene of Percherons being put through their paces for the benefit of buyers. Never has horseflesh looked more powerful. Miss Ashton gives a careful reading of the work's historical precedents in art, as well as an analysis of the considerations of form and facture that guided RB. Almost by indirection the reader comes to understand what is missing in Rosa's other efforts:

"Since RB was far more comfortable generally with the new standards, in which composition was no longer considered a major concern in painting so long as the artist was scientifically correct in what he depicted, it seems likely that this unique, carefully constructed painting was inspired directly by Gericault."

The "series of small scarlet accents" that unites the sprawling canvas and the other formal niceties that Bonheur used here - both in emulation of Theodore Gericault and to display her seriousness of purpose - are cast aside in RB's other paintings. But why? Was it simply, as Miss Ashton's historical framework seems to imply, Bonheur's response to the times? At the core of the author's analysis here is a faltering, a reticence. After laying out the finely researched facts of Rosa's life and the milieu of Second Republic and Second Empire France, Miss Ashton hesitates when dealing with the two central questions of this study: the quality of Bonheur's oeuvre and her ambivalence in regard to her own sexuality.

Some writers have suggested that these questions are connected, that there is a link between the artist's indifference to compositional concerns, her poorly articulated human forms, and the ambivalence toward her own sexuality that began in childhood. When Rosa was 11 her mother died - the result, in the child's opinion, of overwork and her husband's neglect. From this event, it is felt, stemmed Bonheur's later rejection of the traditional feminine role in favor of masculine attire and independence, as well as the first stirrings of her dislike for men as a class. Miss Ashton quotes RB responding many years after her mother's death to an acquaintance's playful implication of a flirtation between the artist and a married man: "... if you only knew how little I care for your sex, you wouldn't get such queer ideas into your head. The fact is, in the way of males, I like only the bulls I paint. "

For companionship and love, Bonheur turned to women: first to Nathalie Micas, and after her death, to the American artist Anna Klumpke, whom the painter regarded as "my wife." Although the author quotes Professor Albert Boime on RB's awkward renderings of people in her paintings - "(a problem) not ... of skill but a psychological failing" - Miss Ashton resists drawing the connections and conclusions for the reader. Nowhere do we find anything as direct as Germaine Greer's statement about RB in "The Obstacle Race":

"Rose Bonheur, who managed to divest herself of actual corsets, was at the height of her fame still so uncertain ... that, as she herself has said, she 'painted every grass blade twice over.' There is no doubt that the talent revealed in her sketches ... is economical, assured and thoroughly painterly, while the finished works tend to be labored, the paint surfaces deadened by too much handling."

The real strength of this book is in its re-creation of the European artistic, social and political climate at mid 19th century. Miss Ashton's historical perspective comes at an appropriate moment, for, while a fresh consideration of the arts in the areas of architecture, design and music in this period is well under way, such is not the case with painting and sculpture. Certainly that is changing -next fall, for example, the Philadelphia Museum will mount an exhibition of Edward Landseer's work, the English animal painter whom Bonheur so admired. Thus Miss Ashton's study is timely as well as useful. But even a fresh perspective on the art of the Salons will not change the quality of Bonheur's work. With the exception of "The Horse Fair," RB will always be more interesting as a woman than as an artist.