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THE ART OF
HONORE
DAUMIER

An Australian artist reviews Daumier: Man of His Time by Oliver W. Larkin, Professor Emeritus of Art, Smith College, U.S.A. The book was published this year by Weidenfeld and Nicolson. Price $8.90.

THIS IS A delightful work on the art of the great French realist, Honore Daumier (1808-1879). The clue to its originality lies in its title. It is the concept of Daumier as the complete man and artist of his time which lends distinction to the book.

Professor Larkin sees Daumier's genius as expressing the ideology of the French middle and lower classes in their revolutions and counter-revolutions from 1830 to the Paris Commune of 1871. He draws attention to the artist's prophetic significance for our time, the twentieth century.

The handsome cloth-bound volume, 7" x 9", contains 245 well designed and printed pages which include twenty devoted to notes, references and bibliography. There are 100 excellent photogravure black and white reproductions and eight color plates. Together they cover a wide range of Daumier's art, though the emphasis is clearly on his graphic work, his lithographs rather than his paintings and sculpture.

The chapters analysing his development and significance as a painter are none the less penetrating. Interest in the color plates is heightened by the inclusion of less familiar works such as the "Fugitives" from the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the Boston Museum's lovely "Horsemens". Of his two famous and beautiful studies of a working woman and child "The Washerwoman" the version reproduced is that owned by the Albright-Knox Gallery, not the one in the Louvre.

Two magnificent photographic portraits by the artist's friend Nadar expose the artist's splendid head with its great open brow, plebeian features and expression of calm, good-humored intelligence. This is the man of whom the draughtsman Forain said: "He was the most generous of us all."

In the scholarly text Oliver Larkin treats in historical detail the evolution of Daumier's manysided art and the outstanding
movements, events and ideas of his time to which his art was related. He deals blows at some familiar myths, throwing fresh light on the question of Daumier's "bondage" to the lithographic stone, his poverty and his blindness. Like many artists, Daumier had no money or business sense at all. He was often in difficulties and at the end there was no money left. The State paid for his funeral.

Famous as he was because of his newspaper cartoons and illustrations only one exhibition of his paintings was held in his lifetime and that barely a year before his death at Valmondais.

But over and above the fees received for his drawings and lithographs Daumier sold paintings from his studio to very perceptive as well as wealthy collectors. The facts are that most of the paintings shown at this exhibition organised by friends and colleagues had to be borrowed for the occasion from collectors. The exhibition strengthened his reputation enormously, particularly as a painter in oils and watercolors, but it was also a financial loss. He received a small pension towards the end of his life. The State which he had lampooned for nearly half a century felt obliged, under pressure from the artist's more influential admirers, to offer him the Ribbon of the Legion of Honor. He refused it with modest dignity.
His standing was such that he could come across forgeries of his work in dealer's windows.

His blindness, such an especially terrible blow to an artist, was not absolute but intermittent and of varying severity. In fact, as late as 1872-73 he was able to execute some of his most brilliant lithographs, such as the "European Equilibrium".

Daumier was born at Marseilles, the son of a glazier who wrote poetry and who introduced his gifted and imaginative son to good literature. Where, asks Professor Larkin, in the welter of conflicting opinions of nineteenth century France was Daumier to take his stand?

The German poet Heine wrote that he had seen in Paris artisans reading Robespierre, Marat, Cabot and Baboeuf, "writings that smell of blood." He had seen half-naked foundry workers beating time with their hammers to the tune of songs which "seem to have been composed in Hell". There were political newspapers inflaming the fires. Philipon, described by someone as "journalism made flesh", was the supreme tactician behind journals like Caricature and Charivari. He hired Daumier first to draw for Caricature and then for Charivari. Caricature experienced four years and ten months of crippling fines, confiscations and prison terms before expiring. Daumier received a six months sentence during his first year with the paper. Philipon’s tireless manoeuvring enabled Charivari to survive such persecutions for several decades.

The Uprising, oil. Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.
Pierrot Singing To The Guitar. C. Reinhardt, Winterthur.
Daumier was 23 when his drawing "Gargantua", depicted a fat monarch excreting favors, honors and gold to his sycophants gained him his jail sentence. The sentence did nothing to deter him from resuming violent attacks on the regime whose detested monarchist principle was epitomised by the pear-headed Louis-Phillipe, imposed on the 1830 July Revolution by Adolphe Thiers acting for a triumphant and reactionary bourgeoisie.

Thiers, a shrewd little lawyer from Aix, was a rabid opponent of universal suffrage and an arch opportunist. As a caricaturist Daumier pursued Thiers mercilessly year after year, as he did the fat monarch.

In 1834 he published a large drawing showing Louis-Phillipe waving his gamp furiously at a sturdy, defiant young typesetter who stands with clenched fists crying out in defence of Freedom of the Press: "Don't meddle with it."

This typesetter is one of the few examples of the organised worker to appear in Daumier's work. He is drawn with sympathy and without condescension, to use Professor Larkin's terms, and as one who deserves the tribute which Victor Hugo was to offer in later years—"true, formidable and sincere."

Whenever Daumier drew or painted working class men or women he invariably invested them with their full dignity and humanity. Unlike many of the solid citizenry of his day he had no fear of the working class and depicted the people with warmth and understanding. The peasant does not often appear among his images, but when he invented Ratapoil, the political bully and magsman, he made one drawing of the scoundrel blowing his shady promises into the ear of a wary peasant who turns aside with a wonderfully observed scepticism, his earthy commonsense warning him against the glib tongued humbug.

In 1834 crowds gathered before the publisher's window where Daumier's lithograph "Rue Transnonain" was displayed. The workers' patience with a regime which blandly ignored them was becoming exhausted. Strikes had broken out in Lyons and then in Paris. Minister of the Interior Thiers rode alongside Marshal Brugeaud into the crossfire of the barricaded streets. An officer was wounded by a sniper. Troops in retaliation broke into private houses in Rue Transnonain and butchered the inhabitants without discrimination. Beaudelaire said of Daumier's great drawing: "Only silence and death remain." This print was to serve as a warning and a reminder. Oliver Larkin recalls that Flaubert, wanting to explain, in his novel The Sentimental Education,
how a character had become a republican, described how the young Dusadier, standing before a grocer's shop in Rue Transnonain, observed soldiers with bloody bayonets and with human hair stuck to their gunstocks. The drawing persists with a grim relevance today with its wanton murder of negroes.

So, as Larkin says, for nearly forty years Daumier's drawings were to prove his

Obstinate belief in a Republic, in social, economic and political equality, the right of all Frenchmen to determine who should best represent them, and full freedom of written and spoken opinion.

Through characters like Ratapoil, Robert Macaire, Prudhomme, and an array of cynical lawyers, judges, bloodletter, quacks and assorted fakers, he created undying generalisations which typify the essence of political and social cant, hypocrisy, moral corruption and coldblooded self-enrichment.

According to Larkin, Daumier favored the democracy of the historian Michelet who when “the clerical pack were in full cry against him” cried from the class room: “We have overthrown one dynasty to drive you out and if need be we shall destroy half a dozen.”

Professor Larkin insists that between the 4,000-odd political and social lithographs and drawings on wood and Daumier's paintings there exists an intimate, if complex relationship. As a painter he studied closely Rembrandt, Rubens and Fragonard but the graphic elements in his painting owed much to forms developed for lithography.

*Testimony Behind Closed Doors*, water color. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, Denmark.
At times his paintings commenced with ideas from his newspaper drawings. The watercolor “Three Gossiping Women” with its simple, massive forms derives directly from the lithograph “Yes, Madame Fribochon”.

The author refutes the views of the English theorists Michael Sadleir, Roger Fry and Clive Bell that Daumier was a frustrated painter whose gifts were crippled by poverty, obsession with social and moral issues and enslavement to the litho stone and newspaper deadlines.

Although Daumier was often dragged from his easel to make a Charivari lithograph it is obvious that drawings made as late in life as the brilliant “European Equilibrium” and others were expressions of passionate conviction.

His lithographs had developed his graphic powers and made him the creator of forms which most completely expressed the outlook and ideas of the radical lower middle class of his time.

Beaudelaire compared him to masters like Ingres and Delacroix. Delacroix himself wrote to Daumier that there was no man he admired and respected more. Professor Larkin quotes the German Daumierist Stahl who wrote in the 1920’s: “What stunted minds the purists must have to ignore the fact that Daumier labored all his life for a free and happy society.”

Reflecting on the painter’s many pictures of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza and in particular on these later works which sacrificed all descriptive detail until the figure stood for the unending conflict between the “generous dream and the harsh reality, the lean and the fat in man’s existence”, the author again spurns the view of aesthetes that Daumier turned to painting as a relief “from being significant.” On the contrary he says, and I agree, the paintings were his search for “deeper significance.”
The astonishing freedom of the expressive brushstrokes in paintings like “Pierrot Singing To The Guitar” and many studies of sculptors and painters in their studios, as well as the superbly free play of line in pen sketches like that of his friend Corot, is quite prophetic of twentieth century expressionist modes.

The breadth of paintings like “The Uprising”, the feeling for mass and monumental forms in “Head of a Man”, a study for the picture of revolution in the Budapest Museum, and in the later Don Quixote paintings, have influenced strongly the extensive and varied modern Social Realist trend.

In many of these works the light which flashes dramatically through them is not merely light at all but is an important dynamic element assisting the plastic organisation of form. Daumier’s use of light was thus radically different from that of the impressionists for whom light was in fact the subject of the picture.

The American novelist Henry James, in a short but thoughtful booklet called “Daumier—Caricaturist”, surprisingly overlooked in Larkin’s otherwise comprehensive bibliography, wrote that Daumier’s drawings belonged to “the highest art” because of their “peculiar seriousness”. Daumier’s figures were so foolish, he wrote, yet “they give us a strong sense of the nature of man; they are so serious they are almost tragic.”

Oliver Larkin’s final paragraph is worth quoting in full:

In our present world, where Sancho more often represents our mood than does his venturesome companion, where individuals often feel helpless in the mass, where men begin to doubt their own capacity to think and to act their way through the injustices, the impasses, the threat of total disaster, we can ill afford to take any but the broadest and most comprehensive view of Daumier, whose luminous common sense can still in the context of our time lay bare our small meanesses, our misplaced ambitions, our stupidly false values, our moral ambiguities.

Nor by the same token can we dispense with his constant reminder, in hundreds of drawings and paintings, of his unshakable belief in the strength, dignity and wisdom of the human creature.