

Bouguereau's Legacy

by Richard Lack

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905) was one of the most popular and successful painters of the 19th century along with Ingres, Leighton, and Gérôme. During his lifetime, his paintings brought the highest prices both in Europe and the United States. His popularity was enhanced by the emergence of inexpensive printing and photogravure processes which enabled people on every economic level to have access to examples of his beautiful work. Bouguereau's legacy is enormous, yet he has been virtually ignored by the 20th century. —Ed.

The name of William-Adolphe Bouguereau still arouses hostility among the cognoscenti despite the fact that his earthly remains were laid to rest three quarters of a century ago. Both lionized and vilified in his own time for those qualities that still cling to his reputation: brilliant technique, prodigious workmanship, masterful draftsmanship, sentimentality, classicism tinged with banality, he remains a tough artistic nut to crack. Despite the outward appearance of a tranquil life filled with success, fame and money, Bouguereau was a complex artistic personality. Although his reputation has suffered unjustly under the shifting tides of posthumous esthetic fashion, his star is once again rising. Whatever final place Bouguereau attains on the artistic firmament, there is no question that his astonishing mastery of the painter's art will always be worthy of careful study by the serious student and art lover.

Since Bouguereau's death in 1905, criteria used to judge what constitutes fine painting have changed to an incredible degree. Until the advent of Modernism, painting was considered a highly complex art form that could be mastered only through long, arduous apprenticeship. A considerable body of knowledge had to be acquired before a painter could produce work that was competent enough to bear comparison with pictures that had stood the test of time. Without highly developed skills of drawing, designing, value relationship, color, and paint handling, the aspiring artist could not hope to execute a picture that carried any artistic merit.

Modernism changed all that. Great art was presumably achieved through inspiration alone. Nature was abandoned along with traditions.

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Learned skills of drawing and design were thought to be obstacles to true genius. "Better to be an inspired amateur than an uninspired professional," became the slogan. This new creed of Modernism succeeded in destroying the reputations of great nineteenth-century painters like Bouguereau.

Harping on the themes of originality or inspiration, or, for that matter, genius, as critics today so often do, may be applicable to the ever-shifting winds of Modernism, but does little to advance our understanding of the traditional painter's art. These qualities, while necessary to every creative endeavor, are often difficult to define. We can, however, compare the different ways in which skilled painters solved problems of picturemaking. Bouguereau, as a supreme master of his craft, can be a guide par excellence for the dedicated student and art lover. To those who are seriously searching for pathways to greater mastery of their art, the means by which Bouguereau achieved his astonishing results can provide a fascinating and instructive study.

Since a traditional painting requires first of all a statement about form, accurate representation becomes in this kind of picture an essential ingredient. The artist must indicate the gesture, contours, anatomy, light and shadow, and the relationship in space of the objects that he is depicting, in a realistic and convincing manner. A draftsman's style is embodied in the choices he must make while depicting that form. (We must not forget that it is in his paintings that the draftsman's true measure is found.) These choices are many. Should he bring out the character of the form at the cost of beauty? Are the linear qualities to be emphasized at the expense of chiaroscuro? Will the forms be illuminated with a full light and very little shadow, as in the case of a Botticelli, or strongly contrasting light and shadow, as in the case of a Rembrandt? Every painter who wishes to be true to nature and at the same time honestly adhere to the two-dimensional confines of this art must wrestle with these questions.

Traditionally, the human form has been the sine qua non of artistic expertise. We are to ourselves, the most interesting of subjects. The movement, nuance of expression, and complexity of structure of a human being is unequalled among living creatures. It is no wonder, therefore, that the human body and the human

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countenance have been, and will continue to be, the most fitting subjects for the painter's brush. The enormity of Bouguereau's skill in depicting the human form is not comprehended by his detractors or indeed, in this age of "abstraction," by the art lover in general. Only to those who are true connoisseurs, to those who are blessedly naive about pictures, and to those few practicing painters who have tried to bend Ulysses' bow does the impact of Bouguereau's achievement strike home.

Bouguereau's draftsmanship was shaped by his youthful enchantment with painters of the Quattrocento, and with Raphael, Da Vinci, and Michelangelo. As a fledgling Prix de Rome recipient trained in the nineteenth century French academic tradition, his early enthusiasm for the Italian Primitives such as Giotto was somewhat exceptional and indicated the course of his future development. Their decorative qualities, beautifully proportioned line, simplicity of contour, and flat value patterns intrigued his young eye and became the foundation

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for his mature style. Even though we think of Bouguereau as a master of "realism," underneath his startlingly lifelike forms lies a substructure of just those qualities he admired most in the early Italian Primitives.

Bouguereau made maximum use of the linear effects of drawing in his painting. His line was combined with either a flat, or strongly contrasting lighting, whichever best suited his purpose. In all his work firmness of modeling is evident. The forms are brought to a high degree of finish without overmodeling, that pitfall of lesser painters. His uncanny ability to conceive of his pictures in both line and chiaroscuro is characteristic of his consummate grasp of the draftsman's art.

In considering Bouguereau's drawing, it is also important to touch on the matter of idealized form. The "Grand Style" emphasized both beauty and idealization of form. Painters throughout the centuries, from Botticelli to Puvis de Chavannes, have laid great stress on this kind of stylization, always, however, within the framework of plausibility. Bouguereau, continuing this tradition, developed an ideal type of beauty that is quite remarkable, especially in his female nudes and in his studies of young peasant girls. We might cavil at their prettiness, but must concede his ability to realize this exceedingly difficult feat. Indeed, *there is no living painter who can equal his skill in this regard*. This accomplishment is doubly significant when we note the strik-

ing realism of his forms, for no matter how much he stressed the ideal in his drawing, he always remained true to nature.

Alongside his mastery of line, Bouguereau utilizes tone relationships with commanding authority. Harmony of dark and light tones is of first importance in a painting. It is even more crucial than color since tone arrangement, or, as it is more often called, value arrangement *must* underlie every color scheme. Color, or hue, cannot exist without value. Painters often say that any color scheme will suffice if the values are harmoniously conceived. Bouguereau's handsome value harmonies are like music of great beauty and subtlety.

An excellent example of Bouguereau's ingenious use of light and shadow is seen in the celebrated *Nymphs and Satyr*. The figure grasping the left arm of the satyr is backlit with strong reflected light pouring into the shadow side of the head and shoulders, posing one of the most difficult problems for the draftsman. A head of this sort must be modeled with a minimum of tone contrast in order to oppose those passages in the light that are fully modeled. Bouguereau succeeds with consummate authority. In *Nymphs and Satyr*, one of his finest works, we can clearly see the underlying linear structure. (It must be pointed out that it is not enough to conceive of a picture in line, but those lines must be beautifully proportioned in relation to each other and to the picture format.

Bouguereau rarely falters in this regard.)



Nymphs and Satyr, 1873, 102% × 70%. Courtesy of Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Another instance of Bouguereau's skill is his command of tone harmony as in the fine picture called *Homer and His Guide*. Incidentally, only a recalcitrant modernist would call this powerful conception sentimental. The vigorous forms, the flurry of movement of the distant boys and dogs contrasted with the noble solemnity of Homer, the awakening consciousness of the

boy leading the blind poet, all combine to convey to us the stately drama of the encounter. The rich dark of the boy's hair in the foreground and the strongly contrasting values used in modeling the head of Homer along with the cunning device of the lightless eye sockets give the center of interest the required focus. Bouguereau's famous shimmering white drapery is in evidence here in the form of the poet's tunic. The light accents are repeated here and there on the fur of the dog in the foreground, restoring balance to the tonal arrangement. The beautifully graded value of the sky and the dark masses of the vegetation admirably set off the figures of youth and age conceived in contrasting dark and light, thus completing the splendid composition.

His mastery of tone must be conceded by the discerning eye, but what about his color? It was fashionable in the earlier part of this century to deride the color of the 19th century French academicians as insipid, uninspired, and downright ugly. Even the great Ingres was not spared from this kind of attack by the critics. What these critics too often forgot in their haste to compare, unfairly, academic color with that of the Impressionists, was that classical forms require a more muted, subdued harmony in order to enhance their intrinsic qualities. From the time of Raphael and Leonardo, there has been authoritative precedence for this practice. Successfully uniting opulence of color, richness of chiaroscuro and beauty of form is an achievement seldom reached in art.

Certain works by Titian, such as *Sacred and Profane Love*, and *Bacchus and Ariadne* represent a high point in bringing these opposites together; and they have rarely, if ever, been surpassed. Bouguereau does not have Titian's gift for color, but he nonetheless manages, in his own way, to create lovely, muted harmonies utilizing silvery greys, browns, soft greens, whites, and warm blacks, along with occasional bursts of livelier hues such as violets, indian red, and blues. Especially in his flesh tones, Bouguereau shows his true gift as a colorist. His infants, babes, and cherubs are modeled with delicately graded warm and cools, giving to the skin a healthy glow. His young peasant girls and the nudes are exceedingly life-like in color primarily because he manages to infuse into his delicate half-tints just the right balance between ruddiness and coolness. Though Bouguereau is not quite a Rubens or a Titian, he must, however, be appreciated as a sensitive colorist who understood his own strengths and weaknesses and was thereby able to enhance his extraordinary mastery of form with just the right note of color.

An intriguing and as yet unexplored facet of Bouguereau's art is the extent of his use of photographs. We know that most of the painters of his time were fascinated by the possibilities and uses of the newly developed science of photography. Degas, Gérôme, Eakins, and Bouguereau, himself,

made extensive use of the photographic image. In contrast to the nauseating slickness so often found in the work of contemporary realists who rely only on the photographic plate, these earlier masters were able, for the most part, to intelligently incorporate photographs into their work without, however, having it look "photographic." The successful results attained by them indicate that photography, while frequently misused by the untrained, can expand the possibilities of picturemaking. Bouguereau's work is living proof of that fact.

Finally, the student and art lover should be cognizant of Bouguereau's thorough understanding of the material aspect of the painter's art. Pictures by his hand, over one hundred years old, appear as fresh as if they were painted yesterday. Only occasionally, through neglect and improper conservation, does one see the evidence of cracks or discoloration in his pictures. To the layman, paint manipulation may seem a rather homely subject, but to the painter, especially those who are trying to reconstruct the knowledge of past practices, it is of vital importance. In spite of the complexity and high finish of his forms, Bouguereau evidently painted directly and with great speed. There appears to be very little use of glazing or scumbling. To my knowledge there are no existing records of the medium he used or, for that matter, his palette. These facts, of keen interest to the practicing painter, remain to be unearthed by the scholar.

I have attempted to touch briefly on those aspects of Bouguereau's art which transcend matters of current taste and conception. Contemporary art lovers may sometimes find it difficult to "get through" Bouguereau's sentimentality, but those who do will find great pleasure in discovering those enduring qualities of picturemaking which lie at the heart of his achievement. The violent reaction against late nineteenth-century taste that we have come to call Victorianism, remains with us still. Painting, of all the arts, suffered most under this swing of fashion. We accept a Puccini or a Dickens, but will not reconcile ourselves to those very same sentiments when expressed in the plastic arts. Part of the fault lies within our own projections; we wish to see in history and art our own preoccupations and our own sentiments. Part of the fault lies in the fact that we are still too close to the nineteenth century to have anything approaching a dispassionate view of its art.

The present "rediscovery" of Bouguereau will eventually give the great French master his rightful place in the pantheon of art, neither overly condemning him for his sentimentality, which modern criticism is too hasty to do, nor overly praising him for his classicism and religious piety, virtues too easily conceded by his contemporaries. Whatever the final verdict, Bouguereau's mastery of the art of painting is a shining

example to those painters today who are trying to reconstruct the great traditions of Western art. A



Homer and His Guide, 1874, 82¼" × 56¼", courtesy of Layton Art Collection, Milwaukee Art Museum.