

Puvis de Chavannes at Ottawa

Puvis de Chavannes, 1824—1898. An exhibition held at the Grand-Palais, Paris, 26 November 1976—14 February 1977, and the National Gallery of Canada/Galerie nationale du Canada, Ottawa, 18 March—8 May 1977

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Volume 4, Number 2, 1977

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077361ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077361ar>

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Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Jirat-Wasiutyński, V. (1977). Review of [Puvis de Chavannes at Ottawa / *Puvis de Chavannes, 1824—1898. An exhibition held at the Grand-Palais, Paris, 26 November 1976—14 February 1977, and the National Gallery of Canada/Galerie nationale du Canada, Ottawa, 18 March—8 May 1977*]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 4(2), 99–101.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1077361ar>

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Catalogues: *Puvis de Chavannes, 1824–1898*, Paris, 1976, 267 pp., illus., \$9.95 (paper); and Ottawa, 1977, 276 pp., illus., \$9.95 (paper).

Related publication: Louise d'Argencourt, "Puvis de Chavannes, 1824–1898," *Journal of the National Gallery of Canada/Journal de la Galerie nationale du Canada*, no. 22 (25 March 1977), 8 pp., 13 illus., \$.50 (paper).

The retrospective exhibition of *Puvis de Chavannes, 1824–1898*, held in Paris and Ottawa, was an extremely important event, and the accompanying catalogues (whose French and English editions differ in significant respects, as will be seen below) will become often-cited reference works.

Puvis de Chavannes had never been the subject of a full-scale retrospective (238 items in Paris, 234 in Ottawa) accompanied by a thoroughly documented catalogue, as Jacques Foucart's "Introduction" points out. The largest recent surveys of his work occurred in the context of the Arts Council of Great Britain's *French Symbolist Painters: Moreau, Puvis de Chavannes, Redon and their Followers*, Hayward Gallery, London (7 June–23 July 1972, 32 paintings and drawings) and the Art Gallery of Ontario's *Puvis de Chavannes and The Modern Tradition*, Toronto (24 October–30 November 1975, 39 paintings, drawings, and prints; catalogue by Richard J. Wattenmaker, rev. ed., Toronto, 1976). Puvis has never been forgotten, but his works have been insufficiently studied and often misunderstood, even in the midst of his present return to "popularity." The admirably comprehensive Ottawa-Paris retrospective gave us the opportunity to correct this situation. Unfortunately, the uneven catalogues did not quite rise to the occasion, despite many excellent and very informative entries, and we must still await the standard reference work we so badly need.

The exhibition at the National Gallery in Ottawa was a pleasure to view; it was well hung and well lit so that it was possible, with a few exceptions, to study the works both comparatively and chronologically. Immediately upon entry, the viewer was confronted with Puvis as a decorator and

muralist on the grand scale: in the centre court on the third floor, works ranging from the *Return from the Hunt*, 1859 (cat. no. 32) to the *Summer from Chartres*, 1873 (cat. no. 97) and the cartoon for *The Childhood of Ste. Geneviève*, 1876 (cat. no. 114) showed Puvis developing from a somewhat stilted and derivative style to the easy assurance of his first maturity as a muralist. The rest of the exhibition was laid out in approximate chronological order, with the mural decorations and the studies for them hanging side by side with the easel paintings.

One of the major difficulties in mounting a Puvis de Chavannes retrospective is, of course, the immovable

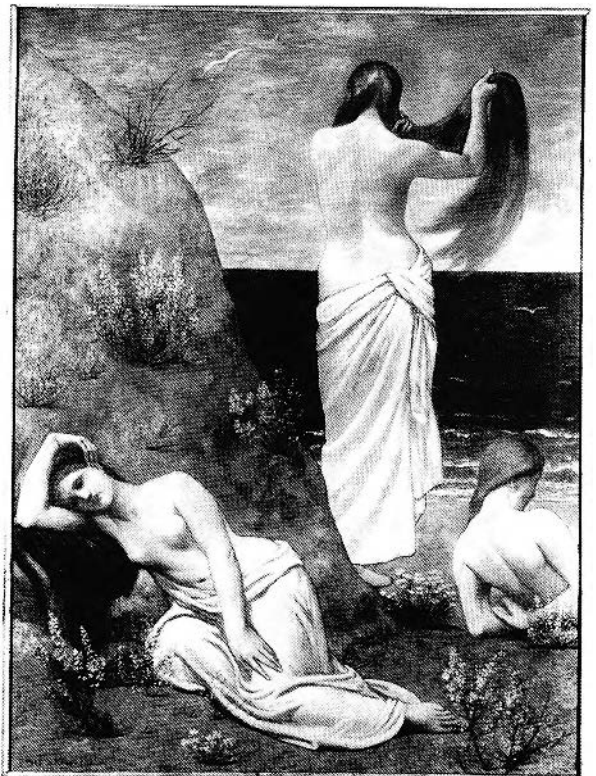


FIGURE 1. Puvis de Chavannes, *Jeunes filles au bord de la mer/Young Girls by the Sea*, 1879. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Cat. no. 134 (Photo: National Gallery of Canada).

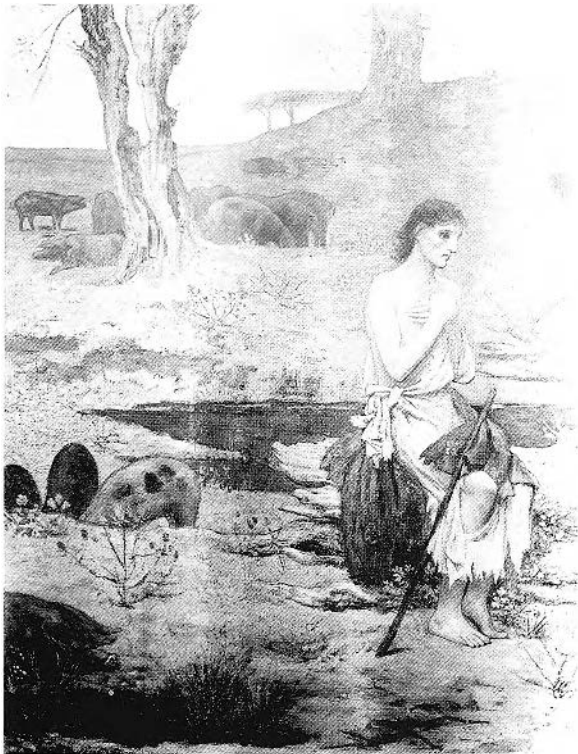


FIGURE 2. Puvis de Chavannes. *L'enfant prodigue* [The Prodigal Son], 1879. Zurich. E.G. Bührle Foundation. Cat. no. 131 (Photo: National Gallery of Canada).

nature of the murals which represent the major part of his output as an artist. The Ottawa-Paris exhibition overcame this obstacle very well — which was especially important for the Ottawa visitor unable to study the Amiens and Paris murals — by the inclusion of the full-scale cartoons for the Poitiers and Panthéon commissions (cat. nos. 107, 114), supplemented by the full-colour canvas of *Summer* (cat. no. 97), to give the viewer some sense of the scale and overall impact of Puvis's murals.

All other public mural commissions were represented, with the exception of the hemicycle for the Sorbonne, by watercolours, oil sketches, and preparatory drawings, as well as by reduced replicas. Puvis also did three mural commissions for private homes, all of which were represented in the exhibition: Brouchy, 1854, which was the occasion of Puvis's self-discovery as a muralist; the Claude Vignon home, 1866, three out of four of whose somewhat weak and pallid original "panels" were on view (cat. nos. 59–61), and the *Pleasant Land* for Léon Bonnat, 1882. To this category should perhaps be added the *Young Girls by the Sea*, 1879 (cat. no. 134, Fig. 1), as noted in the catalogue (p. 153E [English ed.] and p. 155F [French ed.]), although it was not designed for a specific site.

Equally well represented were the easel paintings. Those from Puvis's early years, 1848–61, intrigued the viewer by their diversity of style and the lack of real precedent for the crucial conversion to the "mural aesthetic" in 1861 and 1863. The 1860s were dominated by large-scale paintings related to the murals in intent: for example, the Lyons *Autumn*, 1864 (cat. no. 54), and *Sleep*, 1867, from Lille

(cat. no. 63, but not shown in Ottawa). The great period of independent easel paintings, ca. 1869–ca. 1887, was well presented in Ottawa: what a rare opportunity to be able to see *Hope*, 1872 (cat. nos. 90, 91 — both versions), *The Prodigal Son*, 1879 (cat. no. 131, Fig. 2), *The Young Girls by the Sea*, 1879 (cat. nos. 134, 135 — again, both versions), *The Poor Fisherman*, 1881 (cat. no. 138), and *Orpheus*, 1883 (cat. no. 163), all in one gallery. Major mural commissions dominated the later years of Puvis's life. Consequently, there were fewer easel paintings, and most of them were reductions or variations of earlier murals, such as *The Shepherd's Song*, 1891 (cat. no. 195), and *By Moonlight*, 1893 (cat. no. 207). Fully independent paintings were represented by only one example, albeit an extremely beautiful and moving one, the so-called *Magdalen* of 1897 (cat. no. 216).

Among the most valuable and informative parts of the *Puvis de Chavannes* catalogues were the introductory sections and individual notices by Louise d'Argencourt for each public mural decoration. Marie-Christine Boucher's were equally good contributions, but they lacked the former's subtle understanding of Puvis's social and historical message. After all, the Poitiers murals of 1870–75 (p. 124E, pp. 126–27F) surely offer a commentary on the events of 1870–71. It is to be regretted, however, that the catalogue included no fundamental essay on Puvis as a muralist. We shall have to be satisfied for the moment with Aimée Brown Price's short essay "The Decorative Aesthetic in the Work of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes" (pp. 21–26E, pp. 21–28F), which is concerned principally with the easel paintings, and with D'Argencourt's all too short, but valuable, account "Puvis de Chavannes" in the *Journal of the National Gallery of Canada*, no. 22 (25 March 1977), pp. 3–5. The missing essay could have set out the aesthetic and the function of Puvis's murals; it might also have surveyed the preparatory procedures, identified the function of the various media used, and discussed the types of drawings and their rôle in the creative process more systematically than was possible piecemeal in individual notices.

The treatment of Puvis's independent easel paintings, particularly those of the 1870s and early 1880s, was less satisfactory on the whole. Although there were, once again, some excellent catalogue entries, the fact that three different people were responsible for them produced considerable unevenness and even some lack of communication. Too often the notices devoted precious space to contemporary critical reaction where rigorous and perceptive visual analysis was in order. Aimée Brown Price's essay, cited above, was too generalized and unrelated to the specific works in the exhibition and their discussion in the catalogue entries to be helpful: in fact, it was misleading in its general thesis that Puvis's mature style, developed from a "decorative" aesthetic appropriate to murals, was uniformly applied to his easel paintings. For the observant visitor to the Ottawa exhibition, the mature easel paintings discouraged any such single-minded interpretation. While certain works such as *The Balloon*, 1871 (cat. no. 82), *The Carrier Pigeon*, 1872 (cat. no. 83), the *Young Girls by the Sea*, 1879 (cat. no. 134), and *The Poor Fisherman*, 1881 (cat. no. 138) clearly reflect a mural aesthetic (these were, in fact, the only works specifically mentioned by Aimée Brown Price), others reveal a wonderful diversity of handling and style.

In 1869 Puvis painted both the magically lit and preciously detailed *Beheading of John the Baptist* (see the complementary entries by D'Argencourt and Boucher, cat. nos. 77, 78) and the sensuous and richly textured *Magdalen in the Desert* (cat. no. 81). Ten years later Puvis painted both the Zurich *Prodigal Son* (cat. no. 131, Fig. 2) and the *Young Girls by the Sea* (cat. no. 134, Fig. 1), the latter subtitled "a decorative panel" when exhibited at the Salon in a decorative frame, now lost, hand-painted by Puvis. The dry and thickly textured surface and the rich, somewhat sour colour scheme of the former are a function of both subject matter and scale, and would have obviously been inappropriate to the larger scale, decorative function, and subject matter of the latter. Puvis's reduced version of the *Young Girls by the Sea*, 1879 (cat. no. 135), reveals changes in colour, composition, and texture appropriate to "a version intended for a more modest use" (Jacques Foucart, p. 154E, p. 156F). Similar observations could be made about the two versions of *Hope*, 1872 (cat. nos. 90, 91). Clearly, Puvis's independent easel paintings could reflect a general mural aesthetic or more idiosyncratic, precious effects, depending upon their scale and function. For the moment the most useful discussion of Puvis's sensitivity to scale and function can still be found in John H. Neff's article, "Puvis de Chavannes: Three Easel Paintings," *Museum Studies*, IV (1969), pp. 66–86. Neff also pointed to the need for a study of Puvis's relationship to his contemporaries from Corot to Monet, a subject only touched upon in the catalogues under review.

Puvis de Chavannes did not devote as much creative energy and time to the graphic media as he did to painting. Printmaking procedures interested him hardly at all, but he did produce a number of etchings and lithographs. Douglas Druick's notices are admirably complete, encapsulating as they do short histories of the etching and lithography revivals, and they reveal the interesting fact that five of Puvis's "lithographs" are actually straight photolithographs — that is, they are reproductions (see cat. nos. 71, 166). Since almost all of Puvis's drawings are part of the preparatory process for easel paintings or murals, they can be discussed in that context. One of the revelations of this exhibition, however, was Puvis's maturing as a skilful and, at times, exquisite draughtsman. (I am thinking in particular of cat. nos. 69, 70, 114, 126, 175, and 214.) It is a pity that the catalogue did not benefit more thoroughly from Marie-Christine Boucher's expertise, since she wrote a diploma dissertation on Puvis's drawings at the Petit-Palais for the *École du Louvre* (1974).

Jacques Foucart's "Drawings" section (pp. 146–48E, pp. 148–50F) seems to have been a catch-all: *The Shiverer* (cat. no. 125) should be related to *Charity*, 1894 (see cat. nos. 202, 203) and probably redated ca. 1890–95; the *Female Face* (cat. no. 126) is probably a study for the *Fisherman's Family* of 1875 (now lost, see cat. no. 109) and should be dated accordingly. I would place cat. no. 127 in the late 1860s (perhaps related to *Sleep*, 1867); cat. no. 128 in the 1870s or early 1880s; and cat. no. 129 in the mid-1870s. The elimination of most of the rambling "Introduction" by Foucart could have provided room for a series of introductory essays on Puvis as muralist, easel painter, and perhaps draughtsman.

A few more observations may be made about the catalogues. The English catalogue was produced in Ottawa

and constitutes, in fact, a second edition. The French-language catalogue serving both Paris and Ottawa was marred by poor editing; the English catalogue for Ottawa has eliminated almost all of the typographical errors (e.g. incorrect catalogue numbers under the illustrations) and inaccuracies in the bibliography and references (except for German-language titles), while adding only a few of its own. The English edition in turn is impaired by very poor, at times inaccurate, translations and by dark plates. It constitutes a second edition because it incorporates new and often more accurate information (e.g. cat. nos. 8: 33, with incomplete reference to Anne Coffin Hanson's book review "Engraved Work by Manet," *Burlington Magazine*, CXIV (1972), p. 482, not in the bibliography; 93: 94; 174). It also contains a new and substantial chronology (nine pages instead of one), unfortunately marred by the accidental omission of the years 1880–87 (between pages 256 and 257); and a more readily usable bibliography, giving complete titles and page references for all articles, when these could be found in the short time available for the production of the English edition. Curiously enough, Aimée Brown Price's dissertation, "Puvis de Chavannes: The Easel Paintings" (Yale, 1971), does not appear in the bibliography nor in the references of either of the catalogues. The Ottawa catalogue also added an index of lenders and a title-subject index.

Despite the vast improvement that the English edition represents over the French-language original, a number of problems remain. The "Exhibitions" sections of many catalogue entries seem to be incomplete and/or confusing, although I have verified them only with respect to the Durand-Ruel 1887 retrospective. Although the usual form of reference is "1887, Paris, Durand-Ruel, cat. no. 16" (see cat. no. 77), it sometimes becomes "1887, Paris, cat. no. 44" (see cat. no. 82). Since the same sort of abbreviated notation often affects paintings shown at the Salon, it is sometimes hard to tell to what exhibition reference is being made! The evidence of Gauguin's paintings and Van Gogh's letters suggests that two paintings not listed in the 1887 catalogue may have been shown at Durand-Ruel's exhibition: see cat. nos. 159 and 93. Another problem is that the "Bibliographies" and "Related Works" are also sometimes incomplete. To cat. no. 134 should be added the related work by Gauguin, *Joan of Arc*, 1889 (a mural in a private collection in the U.S.A.); Gauguin's *Te Vaa* of 1896 in Leningrad should be added to cat. no. 138; J.H. Neff, 1969, p. 81, n. 1 should be added to cat. no. 163 (Neff was the first to note the supposed connection between Puvis's *Orpheus*, 1883, and Millet's *Hagar and Ismael*, 1849; we still have no proof that Puvis could have seen the Millet). Finally, the Ottawa catalogue does not indicate those works shown only at one location: cat. nos. 77 and 139 were not seen in Paris, while cat. nos. 50, 63, 160, 169, 185, and 189 did not appear in Ottawa. This review may be concluded with a topical postscript: in cat. no. 90, under "Related Works," the French original "tableau du québécois Lucien Martial" has been translated into English as "painting by the Canadian, Lucien Martial"!

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