

**Elizabeth M. Legge, *Max Ernst: The Psychoanalytic Sources.*
Ann Arbor and London, UMI Research Press, 1989, 231 pp.**

Charlotte Stokes

Volume 17, Number 2, 1990

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073081ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073081ar>

[See table of contents](#)

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

Stokes, C. (1990). Review of [Elizabeth M. Legge, *Max Ernst: The Psychoanalytic Sources*. Ann Arbor and London, UMI Research Press, 1989, 231 pp.] *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 17(2), 186–187.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1073081ar>

principaux: la critique du second Empire, la critique de la période impressionniste, les transformations de la critique à la fin du siècle.

La richesse de la documentation témoigne de façon exemplaire de la profondeur de l'enquête. En effet, les références aux revues et quotidiens du XIX^e siècle abondent. Abordant les écrits de Thoré, Castagnary, Blanc, Aicard, d'Hervilly, Mauclair, Péladan et d'autres mieux ou moins connus, les textes de ces études sollicitent *l'Artiste*, la *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, le *Mercure de France*, le *Moniteur*, la *Revue des Deux Mondes*, mais aussi la *Plume*, la *Grande Revue*, la *Lanterne*, le *Radical*, la *Renaissance*, tout un ensemble de revues qui ont permis d'exposer le devenir des objets d'art à travers la multiplicité des interrogations et des commentaires qu'il s'agisse de Manet, Bouguereau, Millet ou Dubufe, Ribot et Breton.

Bon nombre de contributions sous ce rapport s'organisent autour d'un important échantillonnage d'approches dans le sens d'une archéologie du discours sur l'art. Les propos de Luce Abelès sur la Renaissance culturelle après la Commune, d'Antoinette Ehrard sur les procédures de compte-rendus du Salon de 1880, de Jean-Paul Bouillon sur les perceptions de l'oeuvre de Manet en 1884, de Michael Orwicz sur l'hétérogénéité du discours critique entre 1885 et 1889, de Constance Naubert-Riser sur les années 1890 et les conditions du renouvellement des modèles théoriques engendrées par la scission du Salon officiel offrent les éléments d'une reconstitution des possibilités de la critique d'art pendant la deuxième moitié du XIX^e siècle.

Dans cet esprit, mais sur des questions plus spécifiques, Wolfgang Drost s'est intéressé à ce Baudelaire critique d'art qui, au lisse des tableaux de Martin Drolling et de Horace Vernet, préfère les dessins de Constantin Guys. C'est cette même aversion pour le produit fini, le produit industriel en art, qui, selon Frances Jowell, détermine le critique et historien d'art, Thoré-Burger, dans son goût pour la touche expressive. Nicole Dubreuil-Blondin analyse, pour sa part, les métaphores du «sale» et du «malade» afin de mesurer à quel point le public des années 1860 est constamment appelé à choisir entre le lisse des textures de certains tableaux académiques et les empâtements de la peinture impressionniste qui devient par la même occasion l'objet de la prolifération des métaphores salissantes dans la critique d'art.

Mais il convient de prendre en compte le rôle de ce discours sur l'art dans la construction de l'imaginaire social. À cet égard, Neil McWilliam souligne qu'aux années 1850-1860 l'élaboration de l'image culturelle de la classe paysanne est liée au débat sur la question de la représentation de la vie rurale. Dans ce même ordre d'idées, Anne Higonnet montre que la critique d'art est responsable de la mise en place d'une image dépréciative de la féminité.

La publication de cette collection d'études marque, en définitive, un point tournant dans l'histoire du regard sur les objets d'art. Dario Gamboni signale que l'autonomie de la critique d'art est récente. Proche de la vie littéraire au point d'y être confondue, la critique d'art au XIX^e siècle renvoie plutôt aux noms de Théophile Gautier évoqué par Patricia Mainardi, de Baudelaire dont parle Wolfgang Drost, des Goncourt dont il est question dans le travail de Thérèse Dolan, et de Zola

que Jean-Paul Bouillon discute en rapport avec Manet. Ces noms d'écrivains sont de fait plus répandus, voire mieux connus en tant que critiques d'art que Castagnary ou Blanc, par exemple, qui font l'objet d'examens exploratoires de la part de Henri Dorra et de Neil Flax.

La Critique d'art en France 1850-1900 vient en ce sens combler une lacune importante et indique de nombreuses pistes à suivre dans les recherches sur le discours de la critique d'art.

YVES THOMAS
Trent University

ELIZABETH M. LEGGE *Max Ernst: The Psychoanalytic Sources*. Ann Arbor and London, UMI Research Press, 1989, 231 pp.

Many writers have speculated on the influence of Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis on Surrealist writings and paintings, especially those by Max Ernst. The Surrealists themselves began this discussion in the early 1920s in their published writings, such as André Breton's 1922 "Interview du Professeur Freud à Vienne" in *Littérature*. Ernst came to the debate with a wealth of knowledge; before World War I he had been a student of psychology at the university in Bonn and had read Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* and *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* in 1913.

Max Ernst: The Psychoanalytic Sources by Elizabeth M. Legge goes far in helping the modern reader understand the often complex relationship between the works of Freud and the art and theory of Max Ernst and the other Surrealists. The book is especially strong in chapter two, in which Legge explains the climate in Paris in the 1920s. During this period Freud's writings spawned concepts basic to the Surrealist movement. She not only notes Freud's influence—as many writers have done—but also documents its evolution by establishing a firm chronology for the translations of Freud's works into French. With keen awareness she explores forces within Surrealism that made André Breton, the leader of the movement, vacillate in his attitude toward Freud and psychoanalysis. Legge further establishes a timetable of events during which Ernst used references to Freud in an attempt to make a favourable place for himself in the theory and practice of Surrealism. For example, in examining Ernst's autobiographical writings of the mid-1930s she comments:

In a diplomatically indirect way, Ernst manipulates the events surrounding his invention of the procedure of collage, reappropriating for himself the modes of mental irritation that had been publicized by Dali in 1930 in "L'Ané pourri," assiduously situating his own ideas and techniques *before* Dali's. While apparently agreeing with Breton and Dali, flattering them as theoreticians by extensively quoting them, Ernst at the same time carefully draws attention to their indebtedness to his own works in their theoretical formulations. (p. 29)

In her objective analysis of Ernst's career, Legge presents scholarship on Ernst as it has developed and matured since writings published during his life. Many of the early works were written by the Surrealists themselves or their friends. For example, the books on

Ernst by Patrick Waldberg and John Russell developed from the authors' invaluable and unique knowledge of him as a friend. Their observations and recollections of the artist carry great weight, but their critical judgment is muted. Legge is a scholar digging into contemporary sources such as newspapers articles and personal letters, not a friend writing a homage based on his or the artist's memories. She is analytical and dispassionate in putting the artist in a broader historical and psychological context.

The least satisfying part of Legge's text is the application of psychoanalytic theory to the works themselves in chapters three and four. In some instances these interpretations are based on writings by others whom she acknowledges in the notes. For example, in chapter three, Legge's speculations on *Aquis Submersus* (1919) are largely derived from the detailed discussion by Laura L. Meixer in "Max Ernst's *Aquis Submersus* as Literary Collage," *Arts Magazine*, LXI, 3 (November 1986), 80-85. In other instances the speculations are unconvincing: the discussion of *Oedipus Rex* (1922) draws a relationship between Ernst's painting and the Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This supposition, which is based on a few word-images plays, seems both overextended and unnecessary to an understanding of the painting.

In chapter four Legge discusses the murals that Ernst painted in the home of Paul and Gala Eluard in 1923. She makes the usual connection between the fanciful landscapes created by Ernst and the Pompeiian environment of *Gradvia*, a nineteenth-century novel discussed by Freud. She goes on to equate Gala, with whom Ernst was having an affair, with the character of *Gradvia*. However, the most discerning psychological insight is the plain observation that Ernst encodes the first and last letters of his given name, "MX," into the mural in the Eluards' bedroom, inserting himself into their private marital world.

Whatever the problems of interpretations in chapters three and four, chapter five, which discusses *Au Rendez-vous des Amis*, is very credible. It discusses *Au Rendez-vous des Amis*, the 1922 group portrait showing the members of the budding Surrealist movement. Legge indicates pictorial sources for this painting in psychology texts, such as the photographs documenting catatonic and other patients in Emil Kraepelin, *Dementia Praecox* (in translation, Edinburgh: Livingstone, 1919). Identification of such sources is important to an understanding of the painting as it documents the young Surrealists' interest in allying their creative activities with the psychological states of those with mental disorders.

Max Ernst: The Psychoanalytic Sources makes a major and timely contribution to the scholarship on Max Ernst. Since 2 April 1991 marks the 100th anniversary of the artist's birth, there are many exhibitions of Ernst's work on view or being planned in Europe and the United States. Many of the exhibitions are the focus of major research on some aspect of the artist's oeuvre. Legge's thoughtful exploration and clear insights make an important contribution to the research that is occupying so many scholars as they weigh and place Max Ernst in the history of art.

CHARLOTTE STOKES
Oakland University

ANNA C. CHAVE *Mark Rothko: Subject in Abstraction*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989.

We are in the middle of the re-assessment of the so-called Abstract Expressionists, carried out by writers of a later generation. Many of the writings are based on dissertations written in the seventies; most set out to renew the significance of the art, but on a different basis than that used by the commentaries written at the time of the initial exhibition of the work. Overtly or indirectly, the process of interpretation is central. The most helpful contribution to date is Anna C. Chave's *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*. I find the Chave book to be an important step in our studies. The value of the book lies not just in its insights into Rothko's work, but also in the stimulation of a like innovation in method in dealing with the others. I shall develop the importance of the Chave book and contrast it with other major contributions in the re-assessment: Alwynne Mackie, *Art/Talk: Theory and Practice in Abstract Expressionism* (New York, 1989), and Ann Gibson's essay, "The Rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism," in Michael Cusping, *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments* (Buffalo, 1987).

In her introductory chapter, Chave describes her purpose as follows: "The aim of the present text is to construct an approach to the subject matter of Rothko's classic paintings and, more broadly, to explore how and what his paintings mean" (p. 33). This statement of objective is common to this line of recent literature about the Abstract Expressionists. The "classic paintings" are the Rothkos done from 1949 until his death. She wishes to deal with the interpretation of works that were at that time radically abstract, non-representational. There is no question but that this is the significant problem for us.

Early on, Chave raises a number of important issues of methodology. One is the question of intent. For Chave, as well as Mackie and Gibson, this involves the use of the artist's own statements: "What concerns me instead is the dialectic between what Rothko said he did and what he did, as I (and other writers) perceive it from a historical distance" (p. 30).

Chave uses Rothko's words, but on the basis that the link between words and the paintings needs explanation. She adds her own observation to bridge the gap, to supply the third step in the dialectic. In this regard, the contrast with the Mackie book is important. In *Art/Talk* Mackie treats the theory, the statements of the artists as all important. "Gradually they articulated the theory they believed was the centre and life blood of their art—the theory of the abstract mystic symbol" (p. 18) and for her "all the artists considered had a quite clearly defined theory about what their art should be" (p. 12). This belief in the centrality of theory and its transparency is also basic to Gibson.

In contrast, Chave sees the relationship between words, theory, and the paintings as involving a gap, an ambiguity. The significant thing about her writing is that she makes an important contribution to filling the gap. She more actively adds a Hegelian synthesis between works and words. In her introduction on methodology, Chave refers to recent literature on intent