WONDER-WOMEN FROM FRANCE: ROSA BONHEUR AND HENRIETTE BROWNE AND THEIR PHENOMENAL SUCCESS WITH THE BRITISH PRESS 1850-1862

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In mid-nineteenth-century Britain the opportunities available for female artists to achieve notoriety were limited. Yet two French women painters, Rosa Bonheur and Henriette Browne, were welcomed into the English art establishment by both critics and the public alike. This article will consider the factors behind their success and provide a wide-ranging analysis of the critical appraisals of their works appearing in the British periodical press. Such reviews and notices leave the modern scholar with a picture of two "foreign" women artists who were in a sense considered by their British admirers as super, or at least somewhat masculine females, far exceeding the capabilities of the average woman.

Art reviews in the Victorian periodical press constantly suggested that women artists could not dream of competing seriously with men. In 1857, for instance, the *Critic* admitted: "It is in rare instances only that the pencil of the softer sex can enter into successful rivalry with that of the stronger" ("Society of Women Artists" 15 June 1857: 280). Women were known to paint with "feminine softness or subtlety" (Hird 42) and their productions were considered to be placed at a "disadvantage in the immediate vicinity of those of the male intellect" (280). There was also the question of how critics could seriously assess the works of women artists without bruising their delicate egos. The *Illustrated Times*, reviewing the Annual Exhibition of the Society of Female Artists in 1858, protested:

> REALLY we are placed, as critics, in a very embarrassing position. What are we to do with these ladies? . . . If we bestow lavish praise on the ladies, we shall be accused of a fawning and spaniel-like desire to curry favour with the gentler sex. . . . Should we, on the contrary, determine, regardless of sex, to do our duty with conscientious severity, tuck up our sleeves, clench our teeth, knit our brows . . . what will be our fate when this article is printed? ("Society of Female Artists" 17 April: 287)

Perhaps it was more convenient for English critics to critique the works of continental women artists such as Bonheur and Browne who were geographically and nationally distanced. Nevertheless these two painters revealed to the those critics rare talent that was not readily replicated by their sister artists in Britain. Bonheur proved a charismatic celebrity and Browne, though much in her shadow, was highly esteemed for her technical abilities.

Bonheur was educated by her father Raymond Bonheur, once a student of Jacques Louis David's pupil, Louis Boulanger. Bonheur passed on to his daughter the

Academic training he had received from Boulanger and within the first few years of exhibiting at the Paris Salon the French critics were amazed at her technical abilities. She was soon noticed by British critics who reviewed the Salon exhibition annually. Curiously, Bonheur's notoriety in France seemed to decline just as her fame was beginning to grow in Britain. In the early 1850s she stopped exhibiting at the Salon and devoted herself to the commissions received from English and American collectors. She was even accused of turning her back on France for commercial purposes.[1]

The promotion of Rosa Bonheur's art in Britain was instigated by Ernest Gambart, the proprietor of he French Gallery (established in 1854). The importance of the role he played in introducing Bonheur to the London art-world cannot be over-emphasised. Gambart never supported an artist whom he thought showed no commercial potential; he immediately recognised such potential in Bonheur and set out to profit from the sale and promotion of her art. As Prince Stirby relayed to Bonheur's biographer Theodore Stanton: "Ernest Gambart had . . . something to do with the art development of Rosa Bonheur. ... In a word, he monopolised her, both to his own and to her material advantage; and this excellent state of things continued to the end" (Stanton 98-99). Gambart discerned in Bonheur's works artistic traits that appealed to the Victorian public. The first of these was her subject matter of domestic pets and livestock; British connoisseurs had a long history of collecting seventeenth-century animal pieces by Dutch painters such as Paulus Potter (1625-54) and Aelbert Cuyp (1620-91). Within the contemporary British school new branches of animal portraiture had also developed; portraits were commissioned of prized livestock which had won awards at county fairs, and Edwin Landseer (1802-73), perhaps Britain's most popular animal painter, dedicated himself to painting portraits of sleek well-groomed dogs for his wealthy patrons.

Further, Bonheur's technique, reminiscent of Dutch old-master realism, coincided with the trend in Victorian art towards the careful observation of nature. She would later be praised by British art critics for her close fidelity to nature, her life-like rendition of animal fur, the character, solidity, and animation she invested in her animals, and her depiction of traits typical to individual breeds of livestock. Gambart had foreseen this success. In the early days of their business arrangement he was prepared to pay 40,000 francs for Bonheur's large painting, *The Horse Fair*, even with the knowledge that the City Museum of Bordeaux had refused the artist's initial price of 12,000 francs (Stanton 379). Gambart must have anticipated the immense excitement this work would create. He later reminisced to Stanton that he "unhesitatingly accepted the bargain" price that Bonheur had set (Stanton 379).

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[1] "The feeling of bitterness against her found expression in the French newspapers. This was especially apparent in an article by a leading French art critic of the time, who throughout wrote of her as 'Miss Rosa Bonheur,' and said that 'since her adoption by the English her work had been scarcely seen in French exhibitions, and not even in picture sales'; he accused her of deliberately setting to study the methods of Landseer and other favourite painters of *sport britannique*, and declared that she had practically become a pupil of the English animal painter" (Hird 35).

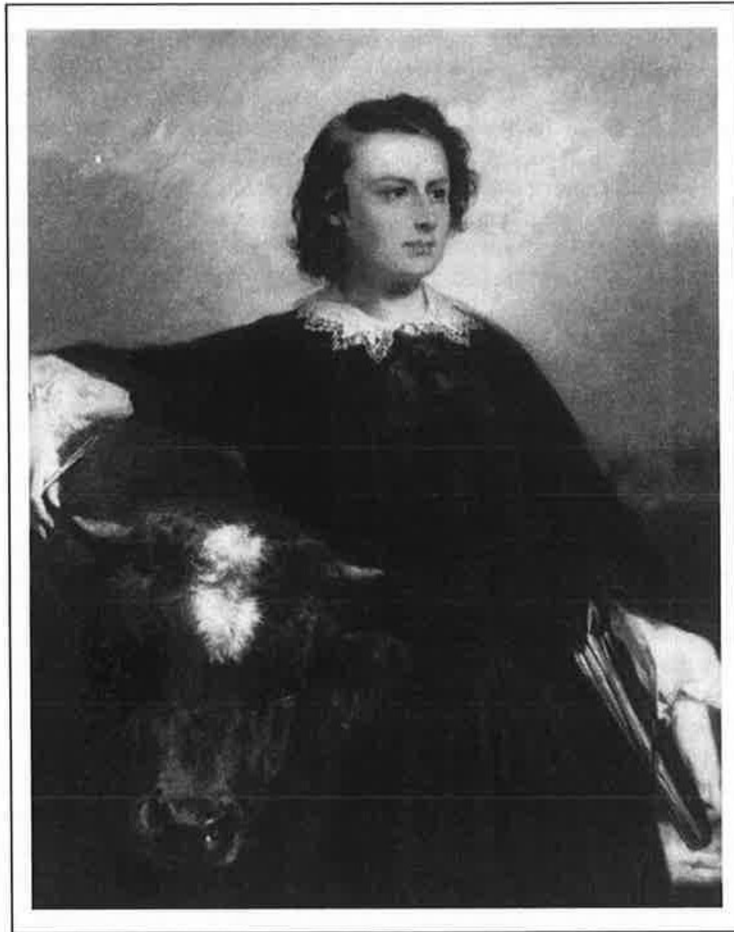

Fig.1. Edouard Dubufe, *A Portrait of Rosa Bonheur* (1857), oil on canvas, 130 by 91.5cm., Christie's London 11 October 1985, present location unknown.

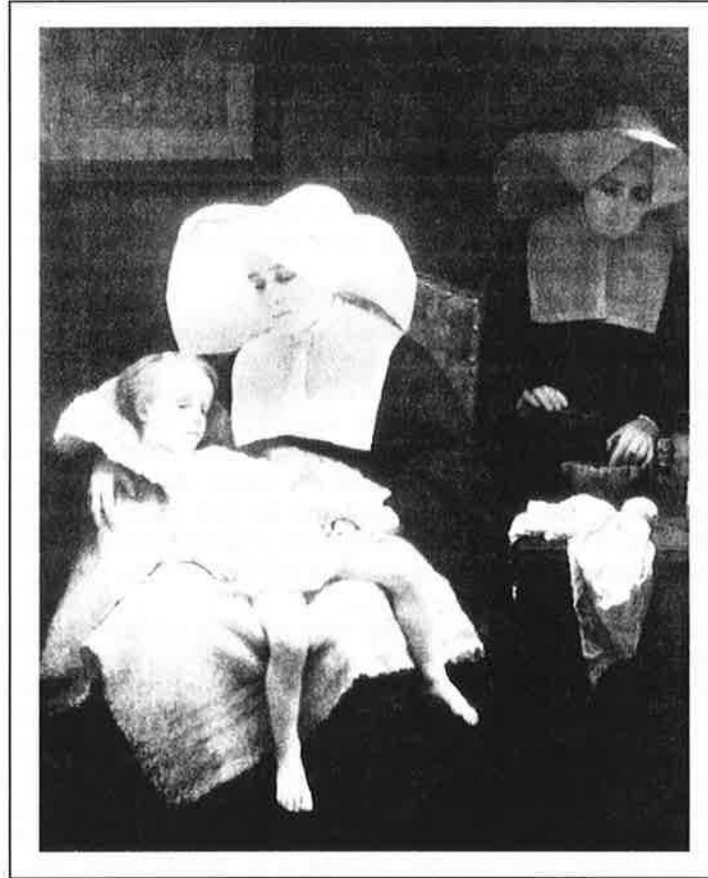

Fig.2. Henriette Browne, *The Sisters of Charity* (1859),
oil oncanvas, 167 by 130 cm., Kunsthalle, Hamburg.

The Horse Fair was a huge success in Britain. The *Spectator* claimed that "if ever a picture excited a genuine sensation in England—and England is not over apt to sensations in such things—it was *The Horse Fair* of Mademoiselle Rosa Bonheur, exhibited in the London French Gallery of 1855, and sent around the provinces afterwards" ("Rosa Bonheur" 17 January 1857: 71). The *Leader* similarly described "the hearty admiration that it has excited in the world of Art" ("The Arts: French Exhibition" 28 July 1855: 727). Critics could "scarcely realize the fact that they were looking on the work of a woman," and this curiosity piece became the talk of the town (Forbes-Robertson 49). Gambart shrewdly foresaw that a promotional tour through the country, complete with public appearances and honorary dinners, would prove to be a profitable marketing strategy for Bonheur. To that end Bonheur accompanied *The Horse Fair* on its tour throughout the provinces in 1856.

In this way Bonheur's gender worked in both her own and Gambart's favour. Contemporary critic Philip Hamerton picked up on the "favouritism" shown to Bonheur because of her sex. As he wrote in 1868:

> It is well to admire this accomplished woman—the most accomplished woman painter who ever lived—but it is not well to allow this admiration to come to the neglect of equally good artists, who had not the good fortune to belong to her very interesting sex. This fact was no doubt the foundation of a popularity which the artist's true talent and great industry afterwards maintained. A clever dealer saw how advantageously this might be worked and the best made of it. The public came in thousands, not so much to see a picture, as to see a fine picture which had been painted by a woman. (51-52)

By the late 1850s both Bonheur and Gambart were amassing a fortune from the sale of her works in Britain.

Henriette Browne was hand-picked by Gambart under the same entrepreneurial scheme. Her real name was Madame Sophie De Saux. Fresh from the atelier of the genre painter Charles Chaplin, she was virtually unknown in France until the Universal Exposition in Paris of 1855 to which she sent five of her works.[2] These apparently caught Gambart's eye and in the following year a selection of her paintings were received in Britain, first at the French Gallery and then at the Royal Manchester Institution. These pictures were generally overlooked by British critics. The *Spectator*, however, praised the closeness to life and "naiveté" of *Girls Reading to a Priest in School* ("Fine Arts: The Close of the Season" 26 July 1856: 800), and in its brief notice of 1856 the *Athenaeum* similarly praised the "still truth," "the charming grace" and the vernacular accuracy of the French peasant's costume in the picture ("The French Exhibition" 14 June: 751). The element of naiveté and Browne's close and careful

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[2] *Un Frère de l'école chrétienne* (2640), *Ecole des Pauvrès, à Aix* (*Savoie*)(2641), *L'enseignement mutuel* (2642); *L'enseignement mutuel* (2645); *and Les Lapins* (2644) (*Exposition Universelle de 1855* 270).

attention to nature linked her art to the interests of Edouard Frère. Yet in the Victorian public's mind she could never hope to match the naiveté and charm of their favourite French painter of children Edouard "Père," as he was endearingly named.[3]

The most enthusiastic appraisal that Browne's works received came from the *Manchester Guardian*. Its reviewer, Gabriel Tinto, was so moved by the "very excellent and life-like portraiture" exhibited in *A Monk of the Brotherhood* that he considered the picture worthy of comparison with Ary Scheffer's *The Holy Women at the Tomb of Our Saviour*. This was no small compliment as Scheffer was considered one of the greatest painters of the age. Browne's monk was described by Tinto as more "sensual" and "spiritual" than Scheffer's austere and idealised conception of the holy women ("Royal Manchester Institution" 7 April 1856: 3). With the combination of humble Christian sentiment and life-like portraiture, Browne could not fail to please the British public. Her early success in this kind of painting would be multiplied in her more ambitious and tender work, *The Sisters of Charity* (fig.2): its Christian pathos would ignite the passionate hearts of many ardent Protestants. This painting was seen by some critics to have caused a sensation in Britain only second to that of Rosa Bonheur's *The Horse Fair*.[4]

When Gambart witnessed the success of *The Sisters of Charity* in the Paris Salon of 1859, he envisioned the potential profitability of exhibiting this work in Britain. To this end he tracked down the owner, who had won the work in the "franc-a-piece lottery," and managed to secure a temporary loan.[5] When Gambart set up a one-artist show of Browne's work in August 1859, he placed advertisements in the *Illustrated London News* and the *Morning Chronicle* announcing that Browne's "great picture *The Sisters of Mercy*, together with her other works," was now on display.[6] In spite of the special attention Gambart had shown in this case Browne's subsequent works held little scope for further grand-scale marketing. Unlike Bonheur, Browne shied away from public inquiry and she seems to have made no publicly announced visit to Britain. Nevertheless she regularly exhibited there throughout the century and her works sold well.

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[3] Pierre Edouard Frère (1819-1886) painted charming pictures of the rural poor in his local town Ecouen. He specialised in depicting peasant children and was a favourite painter of John Ruskin. The *Illustrated Times* referred to him as "Edouard Père" because he was so fond of children and because he depicted them with such "graceful naturalness" ("The Exhibitions—French and Flemish Gallery" 13 April: 236). In 1859 the *Literary Gazette* gave the opinion that Browne's painting *The Brass-button* "possesses not a little of [Frère's] naiveté and charm" ("Fine Arts" 13 August 1859: 166). The *Athenaeum* also considered her an imitator of Frère ("Fine Arts: French Exhibition" 13 August 1859: 213).

[4] The *Illustrated London News* commented that the *Sisters of Charity*, when shown at its original exhibition at the French Gallery, Pall Mall, "made a sensation only second to Mdlle Rosa Bonheur's *Horse Fair*" ("Fine Arts" 11 October 1862: 391). See also the *English Woman's Journal* "Passing Events" 1 November 1862: 216).

[5] The *Athenaeum* reported that the French Government bought the painting for 20,000 francs or more ("Fine Arts: French Exhibition" 13 August 1859: 213).

[6] See *Illustrated London News* 6 August 1859: 124; *Morning Chronicle* 13 August 1859: 1.

In reviewing the French Gallery Exhibition in 1857 the *Guardian* made the following observation: "Women, again, are much more fully represented by their works than in any exhibition of English art. Here, with Rosa Bonheur at their head, they take no mean place; a circumstance which will not surprise those who have seen the mixed assemblage of students working with such energy in the Louvre" ("Music and Fine Arts" 27 May: 422). As this very positive contemporary evaluation suggests French women artists seem to have taken Bonheur as an example in their arduous copying of old masters in the Louvre. The writer also suggests that the director of the French Gallery took an active interest in women painters. It served Gambart's entrepreneurial interests to market women who painted as "vigorously," "solidly" and "powerfully" as men, but would any other art dealer in Britain have taken such a gamble? The likelihood of this would have been remote, as Gambart was the leading art dealer in modern continental paintings. The gamble, however, proved profitable: Bonheur's *The Horse Fair* and Browne's *The Sisters of Charity* were unquestionably two of the most popular paintings of the mid-Victorian era.

In order to understand the appreciation that was accorded to their art it is important to establish the expectations placed on figural painters and to show how these women conformed to such standards. The greatest merit a male painter could boast was technical "vigour." By vigour of style Victorian art reviewers implied masculine power, that is, power of conception, "power of expression" and technical "force." The most damning criticism a male painter could receive was that his work was "effeminate." This term was often used to describe the work of male genre painters with mediocre talent or unambitious compositions. "Feebleness" in colour and drawing, and "timidity" were also traits attributed to male painters with "effeminate" artistic abilities. Other worthy qualities in the works of capable male painters included scholarly studies of nature, elegant drawing, boldly handled details, delicate paint-work, refinement of thought, precision in execution, and rigid study in drawing and chiaroscuro.

Many of these qualities are mentioned in evaluations of Browne's and Bonheur's works, but the key word that regularly recurs is "vigour." Describing *The Horse Fair*, the *Critic* enthused that "in vigour, animation, and perfect mastery of muscular action, we know of nothing surpassing it, since Rubens painted" ("Art and Artists: Rosa Bonheur" 1 August 1855: 372); the *Leader* described its "variety, vigour and wonderful animation" ("The Arts: The French Exhibition" 28 July 1855: 727); and the *Daily News* described it as displaying a "vigorous style" and "masculine handling" ("The Exhibition of French and Flemish Pictures" 4 April 1859: 2). The use of the word "vigour" in all these instances associated the artist with masculine strength and capability.[7] Similarly Browne was considered by the *Literary Gazette* to paint with "masculine breadth and vigour" ("Fine Arts" 13 August 1859: 167). The *Illustrated London News* noted that she had "vigorously handled" *The Portrait of a Gentleman*

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[7] It is also worth noting here that Bonheur's "vigorous" manner of painting animals was on occasion contrasted to the "sleek, well kept coat" and "effeminate sentimentality, of Landseer's brute creations" ("International Exhibition 1862" *Art Journal* August 1862: 167).

("Fine Arts: French Gallery" 13 August 1859: 220). "Original in conception" and "painted with master power" were two other gender-loaded phrases used to describe *The Sisters of Charity* ("French Exhibition: Additional Pictures" *Art* Journal June 1860: 184). Thus her life-size figures revealed to the critics more masculine "boldness"[8] and "power," than feminine "timidity" and "feebleness."

If Browne and Bonheur were seen to paint like men, were they perceived by Victorian audiences to have rejected other traits of their gender? Did they compromise their femininity in order to become successful artists? With respect to Bonheur, this could have been the case as she proved to be more unconventional than Browne. She was believed to be manly in temperament and behaviour and for this reason had become a figure of public curiosity during her visit to Britain in 1856: to her annoyance crowds of admirers would soon form when she was spotted in public (Shriver 34). The majority of these onlookers were curious to catch a glimpse of the woman who had painted *The Horse Fair* "with a dash, and fire, and spirit, usually deemed characteristic only of mature male artists" ("Royal Manchester Institution" *Manchester* Guardian 7 April 1856: 3). Many of her admirers had read tales of her unconventional tendencies in the numerous biographical sketches that appeared in the periodical press. With Bonheur constantly in the public lime-light, Gambart ensured that all her eccentric habits were carefully concealed. During her stay in Britain she was forced to conform to stereotypic womanly behaviour. As she recorded in her personal reminiscences, "that transformation, that return to my sex, were imposed upon me by the fine Monsieur Gambart" (Klumpke 93-94; qtd Van Slyke 21). In reality she was happier dressed in masculine attire and smoking tobacco, and the British public, who craved to hear anecdotes about Bonheur's adventures in male attire, would perhaps have also preferred to see her in this manner. Her actual physical appearance and mode of dress throughout the tour had contradicted their expectations. They were surprised at her petite size. The artist Frederick Goodall recalled that "it was the opinion of many people who had never seen her that she was a masculine woman. I can say truth with she was quite the reverse. Her hands and feet were petites" (129). Elizabeth Ellet also described her "small and delicate" hands and "extremely pretty little feet" (280). Here Bonheur physically conformed to Victorian standards of womanliness, even if her simple female attire marked the rejection of the usual articles of feminine adornment.

Bonheur's decision to adopt male attire was justified by her British biographers in that it made it easier for her to deal with large-scale canvases such as *The Horse Fair*. It was also more appropriate for trekking through "the wildest" terrain in search of picturesque subject matter ("Rosa Bonheur: An Authorized Memoir" *English Woman's* Joural 1 June 1858: 242). In addition it acted as a disguise during her repeated visits to abattoirs, places thought to be inappropriate for a lady to frequent. According to her biographers Bonheur had obtained written permission from the police to dress in male

[8] The *Illustrated London News*, speaking generally about Browne's work, considered her life-size figures "remarkable for their boldness and accuracy of outline" ("Fine Arts: French Gallery" 13 August 1859: 220).

attire to facilitate her work; she did not don male dress at social events. It is perhaps for these reasons that her manly tendencies were not scorned by critics in Britain.

To complete the marketing of the great woman artist Gambart sold Bonheur memorabilia on his premises. In 1857 the *Illustrated Times* announced that at the French Gallery "one memoir, and some other publications relating to the favourite artist, are offered for sale, and Edouard Dubufe has sent her portrait" ("Exhibition of Painting of the French School" 30 May: 347). This painting, *The Portrait of Rosa Bonheur* (fig.1), became *the* topic of conversation around London at the time of its exhibition. It aroused numerous discussions on the physical representation of the artist. Was she depicted with exaggerated manliness? Was she physically idealised to match up to her highly esteemed reputation? Though Bonheur's face in this portrait did not conform to the Victorian standards of feminine beauty, it was its "manliness" that chiefly intrigued her public. "Her countenance is very expressive and somewhat masculine," wrote the *Illustrated Times*, "but not more so than the fair owner desires. . . . The face is less delicate than that of George Sand in her youth, but more so than that of Mr Eliza Cook" (347). Eliza Cook was a poet who had published her own periodical, *The Eliza Cook Journal* (1849-1854). The mocking title "Mr Eliza Cook" emphasises that manly features or qualities in British women were hardly appreciated in the Victorian period. Why then were the masculine features of Dubufe's portrait constantly praised by critics? The *Athenaeum* considered the face "so firm and masculine with the almost stern eyes, closed, sagacious mouth, and sprightly elevated eyebrows" ("Fine-Art Gossip" 20 November 1858: 654); and the *Art Journal* invited readers to "witness the grasp of mind that plays about those lips and dwell in the depths of those contemplative eyes" ("The French Exhibition." June 1857: 197)—thus implying that Bonheur has a masculine, thinking mind.[9] Perhaps because British critics could not reconcile the fact a woman had the same mental capacity as a man, Bonheur was consistently portrayed and perceived as an androgynous figure.

The perceived "manliness" of Bonheur raises some important issues in terms of aspiring British women artists. Bonheur was French and undoubtedly her unconventionality was less problematic than if she had been British. She was definitely an unfit role model for the delicate and sheltered Victorian aspirant hoping to hang her pictures at the Royal Academy. In separate reviews of Dubufe's portrait the *Athenaeum* referred to Bonheur as the "great Athene of the French School " ("Fine Arts: French Exhibition" 9 April 1859: 491) and as an "Amazonian" queen ("Fine Art Gossip." 20 November 1858: 654). These references to the goddess of war and the ancient female warrior race carry strong connotations that Bonheur was a super-human woman with masculine capabilities. Such titles may have been fitting for the greatest living woman painterwho happened *not* to be British, but there would have been no place for them in contemporary women's etiquette guides which young ladies were encouraged to study.

[9] The only criticism Dubufe's interpretation faced was of the figure's exaggerated, majestic size. The *Athenaeum* considered it an overt example of "conventional flattery" and falsification ("Fine-Art Gossip" 20 November 1858: 654).

In rebuke of abnormally gifted women the *Illustrated Times* sneered: "Goodness knows we don't want vigour in the ladies. For our part, we could cheerfully dispense with the dashing amazons who ride to hounds, and the vigorous dames who pride themselves at being able to hit a teapot a hundred and fifty yards with the Minié Rifle" ("Society of Female Artists" 17 April 1858: 287). The ideal woman artist was one who remained faithful to the stereotyped traits of her sex and who was content to remain an amateur.

Henriette Browne, though a professional artist, was seen by her British contemporaries to have retained all the refinement and etiquette of a well-bred woman. She was considered by the *Athenaeum* to be "a lady almost as clever as Rosa Bonheur, but in a gentler and more tender way" ("Fine Arts: French Exhibition" 13 August 1859: 213). All one learns of Browne's personality is that she was the model of feminine virtue and an exemplary figure for any contemporary etiquette guide: "unaffectedly modest and simple in all things," including her mode of dress and absent of "all pretension," a "devoted wife and daughter . . . busy as a bee from morning till night" ("Madame Henriette Browne" *English Woman's* Journal 1 April 1860: 88). She was also "both highly esteemed, and warmly beloved by a large circle of friends" (88). All of these are qualities advocated in contemporary etiquette guides for women.[10] Thus Browne was the perfect society lady, and as Charles Kingsley proposed, she must have possessed "a heart pure, noble, charitable, and pious" to conceive such a vision as *The Sisters of Charity* (*Fine Arts Quarterly Review* October 1863: 306). Thus Browne's art work was seen to reflect her own inner virtue.

Browne's more popular exhibits at the French Gallery from 1859 onwards were subjects taken from the female Catholic religious orders: *The Sisters of Charity* (1859), *The Convent Dispensary* (1859, location unknown) and *A Nun* (1866, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool). These paintings picked up on the contemporary debate over whether nuns worked self-effacingly for the good of the sick and needy or for their own interests to secure a higher place in heaven.[11] Many Protestant Victorians were alarmed by the fact that the Catholic sisterhoods still practised morbid and monkish rituals like penance, self-mutilation and self-denial. Male British painters of convent scenes, such as John Everett Millais and Alfred Elmore, dwelt much on these morbid fantasies. Contemporary supporters of convents, however, seemed to promulgate the same message as Browne: that a woman could find a far worse occupation than as a sister of

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[10] For instance, John Butcher's *Etiquette for the Use of All* advocated for women "self-regulating power, by which the affections and passions are rendered subservient to the dictates of reason" (102). He also advised them to cultivate "industrious habits" (92).

[11] See the *Dublin Review* which defended convents and praised the Sisters of Mercy for tending to poor and sick strangers while placing their own lives at risk ("Convents" December 1852: 525); Mrs Jameson who, in her lecture *Sisters of Charity*, labels them as good-doers (25 ff.); Frances Power Cobbe, writing for *Fraser's Magazine*, who contrarily complains that the nuns attempt to "earn salvation for themselves by penitential practices and meritorious 'works'" (December 1862: 788); and *Macmillan's Magazine* which criticised the petty tyrannies, frivolous penance and monastic self deprivations of religious orders ("Two Views of the Convent Question" April 1869: 534-43).

charity.[12] According to the *Dublin Review* the nuns of this order were nothing less than "ministering angels" in the world of philanthropy ("Mrs Jameson's Sisters of Charity" March 1855: 454) and positive role-models for un-married women who had no ties and familial duties, and whose lifestyle consisted of scheming to snare a husband, nursing dogs, "playing cards," reading novels and "back-biting their neighbours" (460). The cloister could give them a vocation, teach them discipline, and train their "woman's instinctive feelings of piety and tenderness for a particular purpose" (457). Thus Browne's nun pictures celebrate the qualities which the convent instilled in all its recruits. She presented nuns as emblems of perfect womanhood. Discussing the *Sisters of Charity* in 1859, the *Athenaeum* was relieved finally to see a real woman's face painted into a modern work, "not a Keepsake one, or a stone one—a rosy, warm face, glowing with a woman's love for children, and looking so blossom-like, pretty and innocent and good" ("Fine Arts: French Exhibition" 13 August: 213).

"Propriety" and "delicacy" were two contemporary key-words in polite discourse used to describe women and female sexuality (Melman 100). In the 1872 edition of *Chambers English Dictionary* the word "delicacy" is defined as "softness," "neatness," "politeness of manners," as well as tenderness, feebleness and "weakness of constitution." While all these definitions were thought to apply to women in general, all but the last two are either used or alluded to by critics describing Browne's nuns. Tom Taylor praised the two ministrants in *The Sisters of Charity* for "the sentiment of womanly tenderness and Christian love which irradiates their calm faces under their broad white lappets" (171); and the *Literary Gazette* noted that this picture was "wrought out with much delicacy and tenderness" and that "pure, loving, womanly sympathy beams through the outside formalism" ("Fine Arts" 13 August 1859: 167).

It may seem paradoxical that Victorian critics would extol Browne's tenderly feminine rendition of women, and at the same time revere her masculine paint-work and her careful drawing skills. In fact her technical capabilities seemed to enhance her depiction of the best traits of the female characters, venerating further the virtues of her sex. It is of little surprise then that she was considered "a greater moral influence than [John Calcott] Horsley or [William Powell] Frith." by the *Saturday Review* ("Pictures of the Year IV" 16 June 1666: 720). Both Frith and Horsley painted contemporary genre subjects in which women were generally shown enjoying the comforts and pleasures of modern life. The writer for the *Saturday Review* ranked Browne's rendition of nuns above Frith and Horsley's depictions of leisurely women primarily because they are engaged in activities which are "beneficent." They suggest useful employments for women who would otherwise pursue petty amusements and frivolous desires. Browne's depiction of inactive Oriental women in the 1860s, however, could offer little "moral

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[12] The *Guardian*, an Anglo-Catholic newspaper, published various letters concerning the need for Sisters of Mercy in English communities. Their writers, usually priests and pastors, spelled out the meritorious qualities of nuns. Pastor Orientalis wrote: "It should be a constant prayer of all who seek the peace of Jerusalem, that Sisters of Mercy may be daily multiplied" ("Sisters of Mercy" 27 July 1859: 546). A Lincolnshire priest quoted Mr Hayne of Buckland Monachorum who wrote: "The Church needs communities of women, . . . It is Sisters of Charity that we want" ("Sisterhoods" 31 August 1859: 751).

influence" to mid-Victorian audiences and consequently were less enthusiastically received by contemporary British critics than her pictures of the Sisters of Charity.

In 1860 Browne received her first glimpse of the harem world during a visit to Constantinople. Her husband, a French diplomat, travelled to the East with the suite of Count Waleski, and Browne accompanied him. From this date onward she started to depict the domestic lives of Oriental woman within the harem. Her husband's connections would undoubtedly have facilitated her admittance into the mysterious, female-only domain, the Eastern harem (Lewis 57); the *Illustrated London News*, however, claimed that the artist took "advantage of her sex," to received a first hand glimpse of harem life ("Fine Arts: French and Flemish Exhibition" 19 April 1862: 405). Other French orientalist painters such as Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres and Jean Léon Gérôme had painted what they could only imagine harem-life to be like: a site of unrelenting female sexuality. Browne's vision of the harem on the contrary depicted the social respectability and maternal responsibility of its female dwellers. They are not pawing over each others' eroticised bodies like the women in Ingres or Gérôme's harem scenes, instead they are presented in the company of children and covered from head to toe in voluminous drapery and veils. In fact the *Daily News* wrote that *Interior of Harem, Constantinople, 1860* was so valuable a representation that "we could scarcely have from a male pencil" a harem scene of the same calibre ("Fine Arts: The French Exhibition" 15 April 1862: 2).

In its critique of *Interior of a Harem*, the *London Review* remarked that "if this lady paints the Harem from personal knowledge [as the Paris catalogue seemed to imply], the painting is a most valuable one; at any rate, it must remain extremely pleasing. The view which it presents of harem-life is that of sensitive, not gorgeous or luscious, indolence" ("The French and Flemish Exhibition" 16 April 1862: 370). Gambart would surely have been confident in exhibiting such respectable harem scenes as this one in which there was no nudity to offend the sensibilities of the prudish Victorian public and in which the admired qualities of Western women—delicacy, sensitivity and modesty—were also attributed to the Eastern woman. In spite of this, Browne's harem women excited less public attention than her convent subjects. The criticism in Victorian periodicals seems to infer that the Middle-Eastern women Browne depicted were less fitting female role-models than her nuns. Where the latter were viewed as examples of useful, philanthropic women, the former were perceived as semi-conscious beings with unfulfilled lives. The words that the critics used to describe them include "sleepy," "sluggish," "dreamy," "vapoury," and "lingering." These all suggest a perceived lack of substance to the Eastern women's lives. Browne's harem women carry out no useful act, and the British critics were quick to note this. Their interpretation of Browne's harem pictures imply that Eastern women could not be placed on the same level as Europeans no matter how virtuous and chaste they have been depicted. Nonetheless Browne continued to enjoy considerable success in Britain with her Eastern scenes. These pictures were constantly exhibited and eagerly collected by British patrons (Bonollo 398-410).

Success for women in the field of painting depended largely on their personal conviction as well as the opportunities available to them to treat it as a "profession." It

demanded concentrated work and effort which was seen to tear women away from domestic duties. As one writer for the *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* explained:

> It demands the entire devotion of a life. It entails a toil and study severe, continuous, and unbroken. . . . No inspiration alone, however brilliant, will constitute the artist. The hand as well as the mind must be trained and exercised; and this requires perpetual and uniform effort. Besides, there is the knowledge of anatomy, which popular prejudice deprives woman of the means of acquiring. ("Art VI: Women Artists" 1 July 1858: 164)

Browne and Bonheur differed from the many hopeful amateur British women in that they received support and encouragement from their families and from the wider public. Both artists had liberal-minded parents who encouraged them to paint professionally. Few contemporary British women artists could boast such good fortune. Bonheur was encouraged by her father to pursue her talent and work towards establishing a career. Browne's privileged birth and fortune enabled her to afford lessons from the painter Charles Chaplin, where rooms were reserved for women to study a female nude model. For other Victorian women the lack of proper training and study of the model were prime inhibitors of success as a professional artist.

Victorian women were generally seen to reject their status as ladies if they become professional artists (Orr 7). Professional careers for women painters posed a serious threat to Victorian gender roles because they threatened one of the most upheld virtues of the female sex: modesty. As Jan Marsh explains Victorian girls were taught not to "show off" and to shy from public attention (36). *The Habits of Good Society* (1859) advised young ladies that "an agreeable, modest and dignified bearing is, in the younger period of a woman's existence, almost like a portion of her" (265). Self-promotion and the "selfish wish to shine over others" were highly discouraged traits (Marsh 38). Thus painting was considered inappropriate profession for young ladies. William Michael Rossetti, however, regretted this state of affairs. In a letter to the *Crayon* he pointed out that "so long as art, which engages the lives of many of the best heads among the men of every age, is regarded as merely the amusement of its women," there would be no "female Fra Angelico" ("Art News from England" 25 July 1855: 118). By contrast Browne and Bonheur regarded themselves—and were treated by British critics—as successful professional artists. Biographical profiles on Bonheur in the British periodical press stress her humble origins, her arduous industry and more importantly the suffering she endured for the pursuit and love of art.[13] The *English*

[13] Virtually all her contemporary biographers describe the arduous self-training to which Bonheur subjected herself: "Few modern artists have worked with the feverish energy which Rosa Bonheur devoted to her training. She used to remain at the Louvre from early morning until the galleries were closed, making drawings from the antique, and copying—Poussin and Paul Potter" wrote Hird (52). See also Hoppin (607).

Woman's Journal of 1858 emphasised to its female readers that Mademoiselle Bonheur was an "indefatigable worker" who "lived solely for her art" ("Rosa Bonheur: An Authorized Memoir" 1 June: 242). It described the dangerous adventures of Bonheur and her companion Nathalie Micas through the South of France and Spain in search of picturesque subject matter (242-43). Bonheur would return from sketching trips in the fields around Paris "worn out with fatigue, and often with her garments drenched and covered with mud," reported Professor James Hoppin, "but this did not prevent her from doing the same thing the next day" (607). Dedication and patient labour was highly encouraged by influential scholars such as Thomas Carlyle (see *Past and Present* 264 ff.) and Samuel Smiles. The latter advocated that it was not by luck or accident that great artists rose but "by sheer industry and hard work" (102). Smiles quoted Sir Joshua Reynold's philosophy: "Those who are resolved to excel must go to their work, willing or unwilling, noon and night"(101). Bonheur certainly set this example for aspiring artists; she could boast many "proofs of the reward of industry" ("From the Home Journal" *Littell's Living Age* 8 October 1859: 125).

Bonheur had abandoned domestic duties, and never contemplated marriage. She once retorted in one of her numerous press interviews: "I wed art. It is my husband—my world—my life—dream—the air I breathe. I know nothing else—feel nothing else—think nothing else. My soul finds in it the most complete satisfaction" (124). As a wife Browne could not devote the same energy to her work as Bonheur, yet the notion of treating painting as a profession had been instilled in her mind at a young age. Browne's mother, who was left a widow at an early age, was forced to support herself as a singing teacher before she remarried into wealth. She handed down to her daughter the conviction that a woman should be prepared for any unexpected reversal of fortune and she should be able to support herself financially in case of unforeseen situations ("Madame Henriette Browne" *English Woman's* Journal 1 April 1860: 86-87). Further, in order to compete with men at the Salon (the most likely place for a young painter to be noticed by potential buyers and commissioning dealers such as Gambart) Browne must have developed a certain amount of confidence in her abilities, as well as professional ambition and a serious attitude towards her art. Not one of her British critics passed judgement on the way this respectable lady stepped out of her safe domestic sphere into the public, and often cut-throat, art arena.

There is little doubt that Rosa Bonheur was considered in Britain to be the greatest woman artist of nineteenth century and that her compatriot Henriette Browne was viewed as a reputed artist. However, as this study has attempted to show, unconventional "foreign" women and foreign professional women artists were more readily tolerated than home-grown ones. Clearly the male sector of the population did not want to encourage "Amazonian geniuses" such as Rosa Bonheur on their own shores. In this way these wonder-women from France remained something of a novelty. Like our modern-day comic-book heroines, their art and in the case of Rosa Bonheur, her personality, proved to be highly exotic and marketable commodities.

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