Keeley Weston

2104434

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Gwenllian Beynon

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Analysis of Jules Bastien-Lepage's painting Joan of Arc

In this essay I intend to research the naturalist painter Jules Bastien-LePage within the context of 19th century realism, with a semiotic analysis of his painting 'Joan of arc' (1879).

Bastien-LePage was seen as a pivotal figure in the international naturalism movement, and his canvases became models for emulation in Scandinavia, eastern Europe, England, and the United States. Referred to as 'the grandson of Millet and Courbet' by Émile Zola (Locke, n.d.), his works combined elements of naturalism with the earlier realism style and ideology, resulting in deeply vivid and engaging pictures.

Realism flourished in France from the late 1840s until the end of the 19th century as a movement that 'sought to convey a truthful and objective vision of contemporary life' (Finocchio, 2004). The movement began as a response to the revolution of 1848 and continued to develop in the second empire under Napoleon II. It coincided with various socialist philosophies and movements, including the publication of Karl Marx's communist manifesto and 'democratized art by depicting modern subjects drawn from the everyday lives of the working class' (Finocchio, 2004). It was a dramatic change from the lightness and frivolity of the rococo styles which had been so popular towards the end of the 'ancien regime' in France, and the structures and rules of history painting. While rococo would fall out of fashion; history painting would continue to remain popular.

The manifesto for the realism movement was published as an introduction to the catalogue for Courbet's one man show in 1855, held in response to two of his paintings being rejected from the 'exposition universelle' in Paris of the same year (Finocchio, 2004). In this manifesto Courbet states that 'to translate the customs, the ideas, the appearance of my epoch, according to my own estimation; to be not only a painter, but a man as well; in short, to create living art – this is my goal' (Useum, n.d.). His ideology is further expanded regarding the practice of history painting, in a letter from the 25th of December 1861, wherein he states, 'An epoch can only be reproduced by its own artists, I mean by the artists who lived in it. I hold the artists of one century basically incapable of reproducing the aspect of a past or future century-in other words, of painting the past or the future. It is in this sense that I deny the possibility of historical art applied to the past. Historical art is by nature contemporary. Each epoch must have its artists who express it and reproduce it for the future. An age which has not been capable of expressing itself through its own artists has no right to be represented by subsequent artists. This would be a falsification of history.' (Useum, n.d.). His manifesto was not particularly well received initially, as his subject matter was 'unfashionable because it did not conform to the bourgeois expectations of Paris's Salon exhibitions, which prized history paintings and mythological scenes above all else' (Greenberger, 2020).

While Courbet is credited with being the father of the movement and was the author of its manifesto, other artists were working with the same subject matter by this period, such as Millet and his 'woman with a rake' (1856-7). While Courbet's work was unidealized, Millet tended to lean more into a sentimental quality in his painting (Finocchio, 2004). These two approaches were combined somewhat in the works of Jules Bastien-Lepage, who was referred to as 'the grandson of Millet and Courbet' by Émile Zola (Locke, n.d.) in 1879 (Pierre Brost Arts & Antiquities, n.d.)

Jules Bastien-LePage was a naturalist painter, working for only a decade from early 1870, until his death in 1884 (DiPalma, 2021). despite his short career, his work has influenced the creation of new naturalist schools such as the Glasgow boys in Scotland and the Heidelberg school (Seiferle, 2018). he was also highly influential in the increase of popularity of plein-air painting (Art UK, n.d.).

Naturalism was a movement that reached its peak of popularity in the 1870s-80s, when LePage was producing work, and was the partial inheritor of realism. Although it was more concerned with ‘compositional precision’ and ‘integrating the human figure into an enveloping landscape or scenario’, rather than the political awareness and focus on the subject, and social realities of labour that was so integral to realism. So, it was more of a combination of the ideology of realism, with the techniques and effect of earlier romantic painting (Seiferle, 2018). There is also notably some influence from the impressionists (1860s-80s) although they were working primarily in Paris (Britannica, 2022).

He primarily painted rural people in an 'earthy tonal style' (National Galleries Scotland, n.d.), and captured 'the beauty of the French countryside with an authentic realism' (DiPalma, 2021). Lepage lived and worked rurally, painting from his immediate surroundings and using local people as his models (Finocchio, 2004). Early on in his career he did enter paintings into the salons with moderate success, and entered the 1875 ‘Prix de Rome’, A competition in which the artists were confined while they worked on a painting of a set biblical scene. the general consensus was that Bastien-Lepage's canvas would easily win him the prestigious award, but he was passed over for the prize due to the fact that he had chosen to depict the scene at twilight rather than night (DiPalma, 2021).

(Figure One) Bastien-Lepage (1879) Joan of Arc

Arguably his most famous work, Lepage's '*Joan of Arc*' is currently in the collection at The Met in New York. The painting shows Joan of Arc, aged 13 in her family's garden the moment she first hears the voices of her saints. She is looking at something beyond the frame of the painting, seemingly enthralled and almost unaware of her surroundings, and seems to be steadying herself against the tree. In a video about the painting, the photographer Robert Polidori states, 'she's holding a leaf, her mind is not on corporeal or material things, but she's holding on just so she'll stay on earth, or she'll levitate out' (Polidori, 2015). She is barefoot, and her clothing is rumpled. In the background is an overturned stool, and a frame on which she has been spinning wool. Ghostly beyond that, and the cause of the disturbance, are visible the figures of her three saints, Michael,

Margaret and Catherine.

The painting itself has an almost photographic quality, with great attention to detail in both the setting and the figure of Joan of Arc herself. John Berger writes 'when we 'see' a

landscape, we situate ourselves in it. If we ‘saw’ the art of the past, we would situate ourselves in history’ (Berger, 1972). This realistic approach draws you as a viewer further into the scene with Joan, and making it seem more tangible and real. He’s almost inviting you to experience this moment with her. This is contrasted with the figures of the saints who are much more loosely painted and have a more ethereal quality, almost seeming to blend into the background. The way in which the saints are depicted is also somewhat representative of Joan’s own journey, with Michael as the angelic warrior, Margaret as hope and Catherine as tragedy, following through her triumph with the French army and the crowning of Charles at Reims cathedral through to her execution at just 19 (Jones, 2020).

Joan herself is shown in rural dress, typical of the region of Lorraine, (the same place the artist was from) and in muted tones. Already it is a significantly more humanised portrayal of her character than the majority of paintings of her, as most tend to show her as a saintly figure in shining armour, similar to the saint Michael here. The clothing itself appears clean and in good condition, which reflects her position. Her family while peasants, were more well off than most and her father held a position in local government.

Very little is known of Joan's actual appearance. The first known depiction of her was from her lifetime, drawn by Charles de Fauquembergue, the secretary of the parliament of Paris, in the margins of the official register he kept for daily events. He had, however, never seen her in person. All subsequent images were made after her death. What we do know is that she was of roughly average height for a woman of the time, about 5ft tall (Gies, 1981, p.48), had dark hair and eyes and the darker complexion you would expect of someone who spent their time working outdoors. As there is no true likeness of Joan of Arc to refer too, the details of her appearance are left up to the artist. Nowadays we have a generally accepted version of how Joan looks build up from various works over the years, but in earlier depictions the way the artist has chosen to interpret her reflects their approach to her story and purpose of their work. Lepage’s painting was created in response to the loss of the Franco-Prussian war, and the annexing of the Lorraine region (DiPalma, 2021). There was a notable influx of paintings of Joan from this period, amongst which Lepage’s work stands out, with Joan of Arc not immediately identifiable in a very natural setting as opposed to the more grandiose works from other painters.

In conclusion, it is the combination of Lepage's approach to history painting, and his combining elements of realism and naturalism with that, that creates such an interesting portrayal of Joan. He doesn't try to recreate her own era, instead he has a contemporary Joan, in a timeless setting, that draws you in regardless of if you are aware of her story.

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