

THREE RECENT ART REFERENCE BOOKS

Winberta Yao

Joachim Busse, *Internationales Handbuch aller Maler und Bildhauer des 19. Jahrhunderts: Busse-Verzeichnis*. Busse Kunst Dokumentation, (Wiesbaden, 1977)

Geraldine Norman, *Nineteenth Century Painters and Painting: A Dictionary*. University of California Press, (Berkeley, 1977)

Colin Nash and Genesis P-Orridge, eds. *Contemporary Artist*. St. Martin's, (New York, 1977)

Thieme-Becker¹ and Bénézit² are the old, established biographical works on artists initiated and completed many years ago. Though dated in many instances and even containing incorrect information at times, they are still valuable and still used. To fill current needs and vacuums, new biographical compendiums for artists of one kind or another are continually being compiled and issued. The best are those which are carefully defined and implemented, adhere to high standards of scholarship, and serve areas that are untouched by Thieme-Becker and Bénézit. An outstanding example is *A Dictionary of Japanese Artists: Painting, Sculpture, Ceramics, Prints, Lacquer* by Laurance P. Roberts (1976).

In recent months, three new titles have appeared. Their contents are examined here and their merits assessed.

In keeping with the new interest in the nineteenth century as a whole, two of these deal with artists of that period. The first, *Internationales Handbuch aller Maler und Bildhauer des 19. Jahrhunderts: Busse-Verzeichnis (International Directory of All XIXth Century Painters and Sculptors: Busse-Index)* by Joachim Busse (1977) is 1403 pages in length and about the size of a volume of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It has small print and thumb-indexed pages of dictionary-weight. Containing the names of some 89,000 artists, it is a computer-produced index and its information is arranged as in a computer print-out in columns giving (1) surname; (2) Christian name; (3) sex; (4) year of birth; (5) places where artist worked; (6) year of death; (7) nationality; (8) techniques used; (9) motifs and themes of work; (10) literature references. It is this last category that provides the key to the entire work.

The names listed in the Busse-Index were culled from thirteen biographical dictionaries of artists, three auction sales indexes, and the "Busse Archives," a file maintained over a twenty-year period by the author. It did not take much more than a cursory glance (even with 89,000 names) to notice that Thieme-Becker, Vollmer³ and Bénézit were the chief sources to which the user is referred for information. The presence

of and the importance accorded to Vollmer, the supplement to Thieme-Becker for twentieth-century artists, seems curiously out of place here but, as will be indicated below, the definition of the nineteenth century is very broad in this work. Of the others, four are German works or cover only German artists, two are on Austrian artists, two are for the British, and one each for Dutch and Italian artists. No American biographical dictionaries were used as a source — leading to the absence of a number of American names, especially those considered as Western artists.

There is, quite obviously, an orientation towards the German-speaking countries. Two of the other German sources⁴ are not listed in the *Guide to Art Reference Books* by Mary Chamberlin (1959) and there is reason to believe that neither one is readily available for consultation in the United States. The one that is listed by Chamberlin turned out upon inspection to be a very ordinary source,⁵ furnishing brief, routine, undocumented information. Compiled at about the same time as the first edition of Bénézit, it did not gain the universal acceptance that was accorded to the French dictionary.

It seems, then, that the Busse-Index would be of limited use to those already knowledgeable in the basic biographical tools of art history and able to go directly to the proper sources without guidance. To those who might claim an interest in having the names of nineteenth-century artists isolated from those of other centuries, the nineteenth-century designation, as it is developed here, is quite imprecise — incorporating artists still living after 1806 and born by 1880, and spanning in effect a period of time from 1750 to 1950. And to those who might look to such a compendium to detect names of lesser-knowns, there is no dearth of minor artists to be found in other dictionaries of artists — particularly in Bénézit which has, for instance, simply taken names from the catalogues of the Paris Salon and included them without further research. The determination of exactly what purpose or group this volume might best serve may be found in the background of the compiler himself. Herr Busse is the founder and managing partner of Busse Kunst Dokumentation of Wiesbaden, West Germany — a business which was the outgrowth of his twenty years as a collector of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century graphic art. Taking a clue from this, together with his inclusion of three art sales indexes among the literature sources, it may be inferred that this volume is most suitable as a reference tool for art dealers and collectors who, incidentally, may be the ones most willing — and able — to pay the price of \$215.00 for it. A volume like this also illustrates a recent publishing trend with dealers compiling their own files of reference sources to serve them in their work (cf. Lauris Mason, *Print Reference Sources*, 1975, and Peggy and Harold Samuels, *The Illustrated Biographical Encyclopedia of Artists of the American West*, 1976).

Turning to the other new dictionary on the nineteenth century, Norman's dictionary could not be more different from the Busse-Index. Instead of aiming at a comprehensive listing of many thousands, it is selective — containing just over 700 entries, primarily of artists but including also nineteenth-century movements and groups in art. Although there is an admitted bias towards eighteenth-century artists working into the nineteenth-century, its chronological boundaries are more confined since it excludes artists who had not produced significant work before 1900. It is a dictionary with a stated purpose — to redress the balance of treatment "in favor of nineteenth-century avant-garde art over academic as it appears in twentieth-century literature;" to show the interaction that often took place among artists even though they embraced different styles; and to focus attention on the national schools which flourished in that period. Names or terms mentioned within an entry for an artist are printed in block letters when there is a separate listing for it, thus serving as a cross-reference and creating a kind of network linking artists to each other or to movements.

The information provided for each entry is basic, concise and uniform in pattern. Almost all end with: "There are works in [locations] or . . .?" Bibliographical

references — most of which are taken from Thieme-Becker except for more recent titles — and small illustrated examples of work in black-and-white, arranged on the same page as the entry, are provided for about two-thirds of the artists. However, as a contribution to the standard reference shelf in an academic institution, it is not entirely successful on two grounds: (1) It generally gives only as much information as in Bénézit in an equivalent amount of space — making it, in effect, a kind of translation of Bénézit for those artists included in Norman; (2) There is no discernible criterion for inclusion of an artist, particularly the minor ones.

We know now — courtesy of Busse — that there are more or less 89,000 names to contend with in nineteenth-century art. From among this mass of names, how did Norman ever single out less than one per cent of that total for her dictionary? Would the identity of the author again provide an answer? Geraldine Norman is the saleroom correspondent for the *Times* (London), and the editor of a 1903 volume entitled *Dutch Painters of the 19th Century* by G.H. Marius, reissued in an English translation by the Antique Collectors Club in 1973. By nature of her occupation, she has an awareness of the current popularity factor of an artist — how “fashionable” (her term) he is in the marketplace. A sample checking of Bénézit, which includes sale prices of an artist’s work, revealed that probably some three-fourths of the names included in her dictionary were those who had works sold in international art markets in the 1960’s and 1970’s — some quite actively. It may be possible to conjecture that the sale of an artist’s work at an auction was, therefore, a means whereby his name came to the attention of the author as a candidate for her dictionary.

Whatever the case may be, this book is attractive in format and carefully put together (except for the abrupt placement of sixteen pages of text and colored plates between the first two pages and the concluding one of the Introduction). It provides a general and readable picture of painting in the nineteenth century through thumbnail synopses of its practitioners. It will be useful for quick identification of some of the artists’ groups not too easily found elsewhere such as “Les Vingt” and “Scapigliatura.” And most certainly in its favor is the fact that it is in English.

The third title under review, *Contemporary Artists*, is another weighty tome — 1300 artists and 1077 pages long. It is based on a laudable concept — that of providing bio-bibliographical documentation on the lives and work of artists for the most part still between thirty and fifty years of age.

For each artist, personal and professional vitae are given — including such useful facts as his/her dealer as well as personal mailing addresses. This is followed by other categories of material that list Individual Shows, Selected Group Shows, Collections, and Publications — By and On the Artist. Concluding each entry is an individual statement by the artist if available, and, for most, a signed essay on his/her work by various reviewers. Black-and-white illustrations of mediocre quality are scattered throughout the volume. It is modelled on the series *Contemporary Writers of the English Language* by the same publishers.

Although this new work has recently been selected as “An Outstanding Reference Book of 1978” by the American Library Association, this reviewer has found it wanting in several respects. Publications breaking new ground are in special need of strong editorial direction — and such guidance would undoubtedly have enabled *Contemporary Artists* to fulfill its potential more effectively. To begin with, its scope is much too ambitious — and a definition of “contemporary” as it is used here is sorely needed. It is implied from the Introduction that the focus would be on those engaged in “current art activity.” Reinforcing this expectation are the selection guidelines which state that to be eligible for inclusion one had to be a “professional artist for at least five years” and, for younger artists, “should have already attracted serious critical attention.” At the same time, it is stated that even though no artist deceased before 1930 would be included, the “inclusion of deceased artists is dependent upon their continuing influence . . .” The main

thrust of the volume thus becomes blurred. Although Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Kollwitz, Henri, Demuth and Hopper (and many others born before 1900) all technically qualify for inclusion, they should more properly be in a separate volume entitled perhaps "Pioneers and Precursors" in order to make room for the dozens of living artists with outstanding reputations that are not listed but have as legitimate a claim to be included as those who are. To users of John Walker's *Glossary of Art, Architecture and Design Since 1945* (2nd edition, 1977), this new volume would be a natural source to turn to for biographical information on the artists associated with the various contemporary groups and movements — but a great number of them (such as the members of the "Hairy Who") are not to be found here. Following the system used in the series on *Contemporary Writers*, the recommendation of names was the function of an international group of advisors — but it should also have been the responsibility of the editors, Colin Nash — who writes reviews for a London magazine, *Art and Artists*, which reports on current art exhibitions — and Genesis P-Orridge (pseudonym), a performance and mail artist, to oversee and ensure a more even, thorough coverage. In any case, they do admit to "rough-and-ready criteria" which were sometimes set aside "in favour of more instinctive preferences."

This over-flexibility also makes itself felt in an uneven geographical treatment. Whether it is because the United States actually has more "contemporary artists" or because it had more representation among the advisors than any country, Americans seem to predominate in this volume, followed by the British — who had the second most representation in the advisory group. Argentina had one representative and Mexico none — with the result that at least twelve natives from the South American country are included and only four from the country bordering the United States — Rivera, Orozco, Siquieros and Cuevas (Tamayo, though still living and mentioned in the entry on Orozco, was forgotten). Further numerical analysis is not feasible because of another deficiency in this volume — the lack of indices.

With such a large amount of data accumulated in one volume, indices are an absolute requisite to facilitate different kinds of access. For this volume there should be indices by nationality — so that names may be located by country; by sex — so that we may follow the achievements of women artists; and even by pseudonyms — so frequently used by contemporary artists. The most needed ones for this volume would be those that list artists by the media in which they work and by their fields, such as minimal or conceptual. This kind of identification of an artist is absent from the vita and is often not readily apparent without reference to the critical essay at the end of the entry.

Additional evidence that this volume could have been more carefully prepared appears in the main body of the entries. Examples of omissions and errors will be cited only from among artists in Phoenix-area museums. For instance, the outstanding monograph by Lincoln Kirstein on Elie Nadelman (1973) is not listed in the bibliography for this sculptor. Although Jose Luis Cuevas and Wayne Thiebaud both had individual shows at the Phoenix Art Museum in 1974 and 1976 respectively, the dates of their last one-man exhibitions are given as 1972 and 1967. "Appel's Appels," a show organized by the New York Cultural Center and seen at the Phoenix Art Museum in 1974 does not appear under Karel Appel's name. The Phoenix Art Museum was included as among collections with work by such artists as Richard Diebenkorn, Stephen Antonakos and Irene Rice Pereira — but not for countless others. When it is listed, it appears variously as "Phoenix Museum of Art" (Claude Tousignant, Alf Dunn and Ernest Trova) or "Phoenix Museum" (Arnaldo Pomodoro). Both the Arizona State University Art Collections and Phoenix Art Museum hold work by Stuart Davis and Georgia O'Keeffe, but this is mentioned only for Arizona State University — and then in the case of O'Keeffe, the location is given as "Arizona State College, Flagstaff." Such examples bear out the fact that Arizona's art collections are indeed not sufficiently known outside the state, as noted

in the preface to **PHOEBUS I** (page 4).

There are further areas that need clarification. Were the artists' statements specially prepared for this volume — or taken from some previously published work? Why were critical essays not provided for every artist? And who are the essayists? The names of Lawrence Alloway and Andrew Forge were recognized in a single essay apiece (there may have been more) — and several were finally tracked down as colleagues of the editor in the previously mentioned magazine, *Art and Artists*, but beyond that nothing further was available on their background. There should be a section on "Notes on Advisors and Contributors" such as is in the series on *Contemporary Writers* to help the reader in his evaluation of the essays.

Prospective users of this biographical dictionary are urged not to let the imperfections of a maiden work deter them from consulting it — but to be forewarned and to be aware of the need to check, confirm, or supplement the data supplied, as need be. It is quite true, as the editors say, that this volume is the "most comprehensive beginning ever made." An improved and revised edition will surely be issued — perhaps in some form of complementary collaboration with another volume, the *Dictionary of Contemporary American Artists* (3rd edition, 1977), edited by Paul Cummings who, incidentally, is also a member of the advisory group of *Contemporary Artists*.

FOOTNOTES

¹Ulrich Thieme and Felix Becker, *Allgemeines Lexikon der Bildenden Künstler von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (Leipzig, 1907-50), 37 vols.

²Emmanuel Bénézit, *Dictionnaire Critique et Documentaire des Peintres, Sculpteurs, Dessinateurs et Graveurs*. New edition, (Paris, 1976), 10 vols. The first edition was published 1911-1923.

³Hans Vollmer, *Allgemeines Lexikon der Bildenden Künstler des XX. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1953-1962), 6 vols.

⁴Friedrich von Boetticher, *Malerwerke des Neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1944-48), 2 vols. This is an "unaltered reprint" of the original 1891-1901 edition. Willy Dressler, *Kunsthandbuch, Zweiter Band. Das Buch der Lebenden Deutschen Künstler, Altertumsforscher, Kunstgelehrten und Kunstschriftsteller, Bildende Kunst* (Berlin, 1930).

⁵Hermann A. Müller and Hans Singer, *Allgemeines Künstler-Lexikon, Leben und Werke der Berühmtesten Bildenden Künstler* (Frankfurt, 1921-22), 6 vols.

