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Microhistory and Craziness : Review of Georges
Focus. La folie d' un peintre de Louis XIV ed. by
E. BRUGEROLLES, Beaux-Arts de Paris
éditions(Paris, 2018), ISBN 978-2-84056-544-4

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Microhistory and Craziness

Review of *Georges Focus. La folie d'un peintre de Louis XIV* ed.
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This is a remarkable book, and we can be thankful to its editor and authors. Georges Focus was a French painter from the 17th century, a member of the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, who left a unique series of drawings after his life took an unexpected turn. Mental troubles put an end to his artistic career and to social life, but they did not stop him from drawing. For reasons that scholars can only speculate on, his drawings were saved, despite their strange, sometimes risqué images. Some of them have reached the 21st century, in two different collections, one part in the University of Edinburgh's library, where their existence was known of but drew scarce interest, the other in a private collection in France where they were forgotten until their owner recently shared them with art experts and allowed for a fresh examination of the whole series.

Focus's drawings are unique because they combine a high technical quality with unusual themes and artistic treatment, and because they associate elaborate texts with images. Almost every drawing sheet contains a phylactery with a poem written by Focus. While these poems follow metrical rules, it is nearly impossible to make general sense of them, though individual sentences or phrases can be understood in isolation. It was probably an extremely difficult task to decipher these texts because they do not respect uniform or conventional spelling and grammar, and employ phonetic playfulness. Focus had fun with sounds and puns, and to make things even more difficult for his readers, he enjoyed mixing languages by adding Italian, Latin and Spanish words or phrases into his main French text (It is possible that Focus is using one more language, Flemish, in the poem of drawing Cat. 22, at l. 9, which he would have heard in Rome from "Spanish" painters, i.e. painters coming from the Southern Low Countries, at that time part of the Spanish empire). It is one of the greatest achievements of this book to offer an edition of all phylacteries written by Focus.

Wisely the editors offer an edition organized in two columns: on the left an easily readable modern French adaptation of the text, on the right the original text with all its idiosyncratic features. This edition offers material for more research in linguistics, language contact and speech pathology.

The other main achievement of this book, of course, is the splendid reproduction of all known drawings and prints made by Focus. In a first part ("Paysages dessinés et gravés", preceded by an article by E. BRUGEROLLES, "Focus paysagiste", p. 49-54), the reader can discover the prints made by Focus as a printmaker and sold under his name, as well as some drawings than can be connected to them, with different degrees of certainty concerning their authorship. All are assumed to have been created before his mental illness struck (Cat. I-XXII). They are dynamic imaginary landscapes, with small spare human figures. In contrast with the editors I would have created a different chapter for Cat. XXIII, a small two-frame print with Jesus and John the Baptist as children, unique within the published works of Focus as human figures are its main theme.

The second part of the catalogue (Cat. 1-135) consists in all other known drawings of Focus. As far as I can judge without having seen the originals, the quality of reproduction is very high, and the wide format of illustration in the book under review allows us to admire and explore the drawings in detail: a plain A4 page is frequently devoted to one drawing, which makes for a roughly 2/3 reproduction of the original. Additionally, close-ups of interesting parts of the drawings are offered in no small number. The book is a feast for the eyes. It is worth here noting that the drawings belonging to the University of Edinburgh are all available on line at <https://images.is.ed.ac.uk/luna/servlet/detail/UoEgal-5-5-83192-106994:Recueil-de-Desseins-Ridicules-par-l?qqv=q:foque&mi=0&trs=109#> with a very high quality of image that allows for magnifying details. Each drawing is accompanied, as I wrote above, by an edition of the text of the poem it contains, but also by a rich individual commentary explaining the text of Focus's poem and the different elements of the drawing's composition. Again, one cannot stress too much what an achievement these explanations represent; some of Focus' drawings are so complex and convoluted that they seem to defy interpretation, but the authors of the comments always offer illuminating indications and clarifications, without any overinterpretation.

These comments on each individual design have been nicely summarized at the beginning of the book in the form of brief introductory chapters. E. BRUGEROLLES, D. GUILLET, "Dessins ridicules, obscénités, déferlements graphiques: fabrique de l'œuvre et labyrinthe du

moi ”, p. 11-33, present a good general introduction and show clearly that Focus should not be analyzed exclusively as a representative of “Art brut” (or “Outsider art”). C. MICHEL, “La vie de Georges Focus”, p. 35-47, offers a clear summary of what is known about Focus’s life and its presence in different archival documents. E. BRUGEROLLES, “Les «mille extravagances» de Georges Focus”, p. 81-88, is a general introduction to the unpublished drawings of Focus, made after he became ill. The chapters by J. COSTE, “Focus et les Petites Maisons”, p. 91-95, and by B. GRANGER, “La folie de Georges Focus : tentative de diagnostic rétrospectif”, p. 97-103, need to be jointly read and would be of particular interest for people curious about the histories of medical science and psychiatry. First, Coste introduces briefly the “Petites Maisons”, the Small Houses, a mental asylum for privileged people in Paris, created in 1557, where Focus lived for an undetermined period of time and most probably drew the drawings for which he is now famous. Coste follows this historical presentation by a “rétrolectif” diagnosis, an attempt to establish a diagnosis similar to the one the doctors who treated Focus might have done, using the medical concepts and vocabulary known to them: “mania” probably. In contrast, Granger tries to establish a modern diagnosis that follows modern medical jargon and modern practice, and he puts forward the hypothesis that Focus suffered from “schizoffective disorder”. Both articles are very interesting, and their authors need to be commended for their restraint and their respect for evidence when the extravagant drawings of Focus might have easily led to wild hypotheses. M. COJANNOT-LE BLANC, C. MICHEL, “Les « écritures dessinées » de Focus”, p. 105-117, present, in a very good chapter, the poems of Focus, the method they followed in their edition and their literary environment and sources. They show convincingly that Focus’ drawings can be linked to the genre of burlesque memoirs, exemplified by the works of Tristan L’Hermite or Charles Coypeau d’Assoucy.

I would like to add to the textual links between Focus and the works of Tristan L’Hermite or Charles Coypeau d’Assoucy, this cover page of the *Jugement de Pâris en vers burlesques* by Dassoucy, published in 1648:



(Image credits: anonymous, Service de numérisation de Google Books - Google Books, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=37238417>)



(Image credits: Focus, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=67534805>)

The similarities between the composition of Focus's drawings (one example, on the right) and this image (on the left) are striking and reinforce the attempts made by M. Cojannot-Le Blanc and C. Michel to link Focus to literary figures of his time. The composition of the book cover - its fantasy, its bearded river god in a corner, a smiling dog in another corner, the clouds on which different characters are carried - seems to prove their hypothesis that Focus had a good knowledge of the comic and parodic literary works of his time and was influenced by them, that the extravagant aspect of his drawings is not just the result of his mental debilitation.

The introductory essays are paradoxically so successful that the reader is left with an impression that more could be done, that a full micro-history could be written exploiting Focus's work, and that it should be possible to go beyond Focus' mental trials to write a monography similar to another recent French book, *Le plancher de Joachim*, by J.-O. BOUDON (2017) that was based on a secret diary written around 1880 by a carpenter on the hidden

side of a floorboard of a castle in the south of France. This diary was not kept to be read by anybody but its author, and its freedom of tone and themes allowed Boudon to draw a stimulating history of country life in 19th century France.

It is to be hoped that a similar outcome will be possible after the excellent publication of Focus' drawings and texts. Focus was part of a category of the period's population "in the middle"; he had access to powerful figures and through them he had glimpses of royal life, heard rumors about their tastes and distastes, about their friendships and relations. It is, among other avenues, through people like Focus that high culture could circulate and reach people outside of Versailles, that news and artistic or cultural trends travelled. The mental difficulties Focus suffered allowed him in some measure to break free from social conventions and self-imposed limits, and his status as intermediary would make him a very good source of micro-history for exploration of the social history, arts and literature of 17th century France.

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