



The Joy of Life: The Idyllic in French Art, circa 1900

Margaret Werth

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The Joy of Life investigates the significance of the idyllic in French painting from the early 1890s to World War I, considering a fascinating series of pastoral, mythic, and utopian landscapes. Responding to rapid artistic and social shifts in this period, French artists shaped a dreamlike imagery of mythic community, individual fantasy, and sensual joie de vivre in the midst of mass society. This beautifully illustrated study focuses on three exemplary imaginings of idyll: Puvis de Chavannes's decoration for the Paris Hôtel de Ville, *L'été*, of 1891, Paul Signac's anarchist *Au temps d'harmonie* of 1895, and Henri Matisse's fauve *Bonheur de vivre* of 1905-6, each a monumental and ambitious work exhibited publicly in Paris.

Werth weaves together complex analyses of these paintings and others by Manet, Gauguin, Seurat, Cézanne, and less well known artists with a consideration of their critical reception, literary parallels, and the social and cultural milieu. She moves deftly from artistic concerns with tradition and avant-gardism, decoration and social art, composition and figuration to contemporary debates over human origins and social organization, collective consciousness and individual subjectivity, the fragmentation of history and anticipations of the future. Exploring the preoccupation of the turn-of-the-century imagination with time and memory, nationalism and colonialism, and competing constructions of national, racial, and gender identity, Werth analyzes the contributions of writers as diverse as Baudelaire, Durkheim, Bergson, Kropotkin, Morris, Nietzsche, Mallarmé, and Freud.

Successfully integrating art history and close visual analysis with literary and social history and psychoanalytic interpretation, *The Joy of Life* is a rich interdisciplinary work that makes a remarkable contribution to our understanding of modernism one hundred years ago.

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