



Rosa Bonheur: The Artist's (Auto)biography

Anna Klumpke

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Hailed by her contemporaries as the most popular animal-painter, male or female, of the nineteenth century, the French artist Rosa Bonheur (1822-99) lived to see her name become a household word. In a century that did its best to keep women "in their place," Bonheur, like George Sand--to whom she was often compared--defined herself outside of the social and legal codes of her time. To the horror and bewilderment of many, she earned her own money, managed her own property, wore trousers, hunted, smoked, and lived in retreat with female companions in a little chateau near Fontainebleau named The Domain of Perfect Affection.

Rosa Bonheur: The Artist's (Auto)Biography brings this extraordinary woman to life in a unique blend of biography and autobiography. Coupling her own memories with Bonheur's first-person account, Anna Klumpke, a young American artist who was Bonheur's lover and chosen portraitist, recounts how she came to meet and fall in love with Bonheur. Bonheur's account of her own life story, set nicely within Klumpke's narrative, sheds light on such topics as gender formation, institutional changes in the art world, governmental intervention in the arts, the social and legal regulation of dress codes, and the perceived transgressive nature of female sexual companionship in a repressive society, all with the distinctive flavor of Bonheur's artistic personality.

Gretchen van Slyke's translation provides a rare glimpse into the unconventional life of this famous French painter, and renders accessible for the first time in English this public statement of Bonheur's artistic credo. More importantly, whether judged by her century's standards (or perhaps even our own), it details a story of lesbian love that is bold, unconventional, and courageous.

"The remarkable life of Rosa Bonheur, one of the most highly decorated artists and certainly the best known female artist of her time in nineteenth-century France, is long overdue for further scrutiny." --Therese Dolan, Temple University

Gretchen van Slyke is Associate Professor of French, University of Vermont.



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