

# THE EXPANDING DISCOURSE

---

## *Feminism and Art History*

---

EDITED BY

Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard



IconEditions

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

# "DISAGREEABLY HIDDEN"

## *Construction and Constriction of the Lesbian Body in Rosa Bonheur's Horse Fair*

JAMES M. SASLOW

The celebrated French animal painter Rosa Bonheur (1822–1899) was long dismissed as one of the legion of conservative Victorian painters who failed to register much conscious awareness of the dramatically changing society around them, either iconographically or stylistically. Over the last decade and a half, evaluation of Bonheur has grown more nuanced in the wake of both an increased scholarly appreciation for academic painting and the development of gender as a fundamental category of analysis in art history and related disciplines.<sup>1</sup>

Analysis of several related paintings, principally her oversized masterpiece *The Horse Fair* of 1853 [2], in conjunction with the artist's biography, will demonstrate that Bonheur's art offers, more than has previously been understood, a radical intervention in the visual and cultural construction of nineteenth-century femininity and masculinity. Her "style," both in her work and her life, represented an alternative vision of the modern female body, and specifically the lesbian body, as a social

and visual entity. This embryonic self-formulation was necessarily limited in scope and self-consciousness during a period that spanned a major change in the social discourse about women, homosexuality, and gender difference. But her contemporaries, both sympathetic and hostile, read its subversive import clearly; and subsequent developments, both historical and theoretical, permit that novel image to be read even more clearly than she would (or could) have articulated at the time.

Bonheur was the most successful both of nineteenth-century women artists and of *animaliers*. She was well qualified to excel in this popular genre, having shown a special affinity for animals since her numerous childhood pets. Daughter of the painter Raimond Bonheur, whose radical political beliefs embraced the feminist socialism of the Saint-Simonian sect, Bonheur had received prestigious awards and state patronage by her mid-twenties. In 1859 she purchased a country estate at By in the forest of Fontainebleau, where she exchanged visits with her neighbors, the Emperor Napoléon III and his family, and enjoyed the patronage of the Second Empire aristocracy, with whom she shared a love of country life as well as many political sympathies. The Empress Eugénie

This article was developed from papers presented at Yale University's Lesbian and Gay Studies Center, at Swarthmore College's Sager Fund Symposium, and at the 1989 College Art Association Annual Meeting. Copyright © 1991 by James M. Saslow. By permission of the author.



2. Rosa Bonheur, *The Horse Fair*, 1853. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Cornelius Vanderbilt, 1887.

personally conferred the Légion d'honneur on Bonheur, the first female painter to receive this honor.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to her professional respectability, however, Bonheur led a highly unconventional personal life, which at times conflicted awkwardly with the expectations placed on women, particularly "masculine" women. As an art student committed to direct observation of animals, Bonheur began frequenting stockyards, livestock markets, and slaughterhouses. Because these were all-male enclaves, she dressed in men's clothes to gain access, avoid harassment, and move more easily. Thereafter, she affected a masculine style of dress and grooming, which occasioned much public comment. She cut her hair in a short bob and wore pants and a fedora on all but formal public occasions, when she donned severely tailored black suits. Although she always insisted that this gender-deviant costume was chosen only to facilitate her work, the fact that she wore it for many other activities for which it was neither necessary nor accepted suggests that it had a meaning for her transcending the merely utilitarian.<sup>3</sup>

Bonheur's emotional life was as unorthodox as her fashion. She lived for forty years with another

woman, Nathalie Micas, whom she referred to as "my wife." After Micas's death, her final companion and ultimately heiress was a younger American artist, Anna Klumpke. Although it is notoriously difficult to discern sexual expression and self-image within the many such "Boston marriages" of the nineteenth century, and since Bonheur made no direct statements on the subject, her recorded comments leave little doubt of her great love for these women, which both modern definitions and the suspicions of her contemporaries would label lesbian.<sup>4</sup>

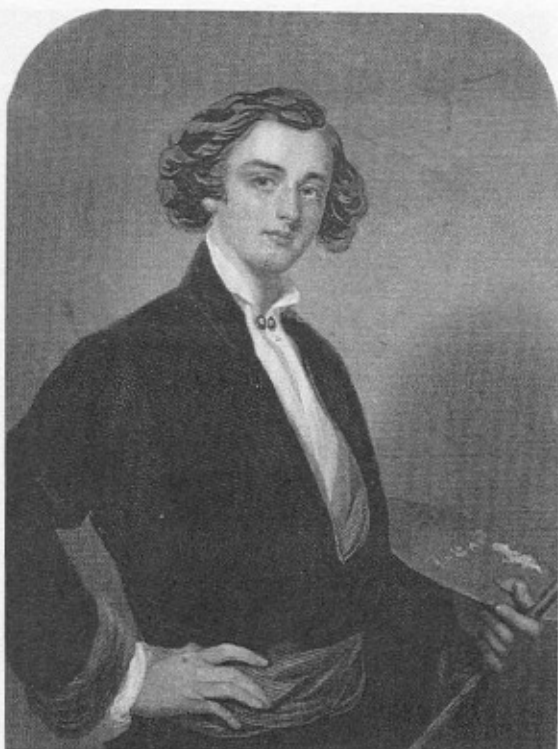
However fascinating Bonheur's private life may be to historians of sex and gender, the conventional wisdom among art historians has been, to quote Emmanuel Cooper, that "few of these ideas are immediately apparent in her paintings, which are, to all intents, powerful and competent pictures of animals." While scholars such as Albert Boime and Dore Ashton paint a more complex picture of the relations between Bonheur's art and life, the most recent assessment, by Whitney Chadwick, maintains the accepted view that Bonheur "was radical in her personal life, but artistically and politically conservative."<sup>5</sup> All subsequent critics have agreed with her contemporary,

the English art critic John Ruskin, that she was indifferent to any human-centered narrative that might offer a ground for biographical interpretation. As he wrote in reference to *The Horse Fair*, "No painter of animals ever yet was entirely great who shrank from painting the human face; and Mdlle. Bonheur clearly *does* shrink from it. . . . In the 'Horse Fair' the human faces were nearly all dextrously, but disagreeably, hidden, and the one chiefly shown had not the slightest character."<sup>6</sup>

However, Bonheur's avoidance of human representation was not simply, as Ruskin and his successors have interpreted it, a matter of clumsiness or disinterest. Two factors call for a more inclusive interpretation of her work. First, although the human and personal element is indeed "disagreeably hidden," it is not suppressed as completely as previously assumed. Second, to the extent that such hiding was forced upon her by social conventions over which she had little control, we have evidence that it was disagreeable to Bonheur herself, that she sought to envision alternative models of culture, and that the limited self-revelation she did manage was later received with appreciative enthusiasm by activists who were working more overtly to change cultural attitudes.

Bonheur's most famous picture is *The Horse Fair*, a mural-size genre scene of the Paris animal market. The horses being led in display, barely tamed by their brawny handlers and prancing in a great curve with almost Baroque vitality, bear the stamp of her favorite predecessors, especially Géricault.<sup>7</sup> It has not been previously noticed that the central horse tamer, whose head is next to the rearing white horse [1], is a self-portrait of Bonheur, who confronts the viewer with the male guise she adopted for her sketching forays in these very stockyards. Although dressed in the same blue robe as worn by the other handlers, this figure, who lies close to the picture's central axis, is one of only two among all these ostensible males not sporting any of the customary mid-Victorian facial hair. Moreover, she is the only figure who looks out at the viewer: her three-quarter pose (derived from looking in a mirror while painting) is the traditional indicator of a self-portrait.

The round, smooth face is nearly identical to R.



3. W. H. Mote, *Rosa Bonheur, the French Landseer*, engraving after R. Buckner, 1856. New York Public Library, Picture Collection (James M. Saslow).

Buckner's portrait of Bonheur, engraved about the time of her tour of Britain with *The Horse Fair* in 1856 [3], and to a painting of Bonheur at age twenty-two (1844) by her brother Auguste [4].<sup>8</sup> Other portraits of Bonheur from these years show the same round, soft face; full, slightly puckered lips; and short, bobbed hairstyle that also appear on the horse tamer. The tamer's hair protrudes noticeably from beneath her cap; although shorter than customary for a female at the time, it is longer than that of any man in the picture. It suggests some special fondness for this group that Bonheur repeated it forty years later with slight variations in the mount and androgynous rider of *Two Horses*, 1893.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly ambiguous figures reappear twice in Bonheur's oeuvre around this time, and may also be self-portraits. The more convincing of these occur in *Gathering for the Hunt* of 1856 [5]. The





4. Auguste Bonheur, *Rosa Bonheur at Twenty-two*, 1844. T. Stanton, *Reminiscences of Rosa Bonheur* (James M. Saslow).

subject is, again, a male group outdoors with animals. The three-quarter face of the standing figure holding several dog leashes is the same as that of the central figure in *The Horse Fair*, as is the blue smock (now worn with a hunting cap), and the figure is again emphasized by its location on the picture's center axis. And once again, most of the other figures have some facial hair. The only other one who is clean shaven is the mounted rider, whose face is in fact almost indistinguishable from the leash holder's and may also be based on the painter herself.<sup>10</sup> *Returning from the Fields* of 1851 had earlier featured an androgynous, unbearded figure in trousers seated on an oxcart, though the resemblance to Bonheur in this case is perhaps more generic.<sup>11</sup>

These self-presentations in masculine guise necessitate a revision of the view that Bonheur was

uninterested in human subjects. To understand these infrequent but unique self-portrayals, as well as their general absence, her work and life must be interpreted together within a wider context of sex, gender, and power. That interpretation must embrace both the nature of her unorthodox inclinations and the severe limitations that the dominant discourses of art and society placed on her potential for self-understanding and self-expression. Bonheur lived in a period of transition during which limitations on women, especially lesbians, remained strong, and the intellectual framework for modern gay and lesbian identity and the subculture aimed at justifying its expression were just beginning to be constructed. Consequently, her work and life present a series of overlapping discrepancies arising from the dialectic between her desires and the fragmentary opportunities for realizing them.

This analysis of Bonheur's attempts at self-portraiture will suggest three principal themes. First, that her masculine attire was an attempt to claim male prerogatives and create an androgynous and proto-lesbian visual identity that would embody, literally and figuratively, her social and sexual views. Second, that her coded representation of this identity in her pictures reveals her work as more socially engaged, and subversive, than had been thought. And finally, that the relative absence of human subjects from her work can be read as a displacement of interest from what could not then be fully "image-ined" in public onto an alternative subject matter that, while socially acceptable and even popular, provided some scope for symbolizing nonconformist ideas about nature that justified Bonheur's own sexual and gender identity.

The meanings of Bonheur's masculinized self-images with animals are embedded in at least four social and artistic discourses of the time: images of ideal womanhood; the tradition of equestrian portraiture; official strategies for control of deviant gender behavior, along with the resultant conflicts and anxieties of those so labeled and their search for alternative self-formulations; and the genre of animal painting, which must be viewed from within the contemporary discourse that drew par-

allels between the plight of animals, the condition of women, and the nature of homosexuality.

The first two of these meanings, which proceed from established feminist art-historical analysis, can be briefly summarized by comparing Bonheur's images with pictures of and for two of her most significant female contemporaries, made by artists whom Bonheur knew. Both the Empress Eugénie and Queen Victoria, who much admired *The Horse Fair*, patronized such popular artists among the trans-Channel upper classes as England's Sir Edwin Landseer (1802–1873) and the German Franz Xavier Winterhalter (1805–1873). The works created within this circle of power and influence reveal the sharp contrasts in outlook between Bonheur and the class that both dictated socially acceptable gender behavior and, through its patronage of her, strongly influenced her representation of such behavior.

Insofar as *The Horse Fair* can now be seen as a portrait of a woman, it is embedded within the long tradition of female portraiture, so freighted with assumptions about gender. The dominant pictorial construction of aristocratic femininity at

this period may be typified by Winterhalter, who served as court portraitist to both Victoria and Eugénie. There are striking similarities of composition and the feminine ideal in his *Florinda* (1853), given by the queen to the prince consort, and his group portrait *Empress Eugénie Surrounded by her Ladies-in-Waiting* of 1855 [6]. The subject in *Florinda* is Romantic and medievalizing, illustrating Southey's poem *Don Roderick*, while the empress, though a real contemporary figure, sits in a Rococo grove holding a bouquet of violets, like Sappho among the Muses. In both scenes, the open circle of beautiful and idle young women surrounding the gentle, fluttery heroine is the same.<sup>12</sup>

Although these portraits are exactly contemporary with *The Horse Fair*, their presentation of women obviously opposes Bonheur's in dress, ideals of deportment, and the erotic autonomy of the female body as radically as the court's aristocratic life-style differed from Bonheur's semipublic bohemianism. No matter that both of Winterhalter's patrons wielded enormous power in real life: in the public fantasy of art they supported



5. Rosa Bonheur, *Gathering for the Hunt*, 1856. Stockton, Calif., Haggin Museum.

6. Franz Xavier Winterhalter, *Empress Eugénie Surrounded by Her Ladies-in-Waiting*, 1855. Compiègne, Musée National du Château (*Musées Nationaux*).



images that idealized women of their class as passively secluded from the hurly-burly of male pursuits and implied that women's prime function was to serve as alluringly delicate objects for the male gaze.

Second, and more specifically, Bonheur's self-representation is an anomaly within the tradition of equestrian portraiture. Comparison of *The Horse Fair* with pictures of Victoria on horseback, for example, reveals obvious differences in their ideals of femininity and the gaze. In Landseer's sketch *Queen Victoria on Horseback*, painted shortly before her marriage in 1840 [7], the young monarch is presented fashionably clad, riding side-saddle, with her gaze directed downward, away from the viewer. By contrast, Bonheur always wore pants when riding so she could straddle the horse in male fashion, and she looks boldly out of *The Horse Fair*, confronting us with a gaze equal in power to our own. The contrasting settings of both pictures are further revealing. The queen rides out before a medieval castle, her guards bearing knightly pennons; the reference is backward to a vanished but idealized world of the demure, courtly lady of chivalry. Bonheur, on the other hand, prefers to set herself in the thick of contemporary life, the only world whose rough and un-

idealized vitality offers some scope for her active, modern persona.<sup>13</sup>

Recent scholarship has called attention to the ways in which visual images construct an imaginative social space, an arena whose map opens certain roads of individual action and closes others.<sup>14</sup> Hence the use in my title of *constriction*, a term that connotes both spatial and social limitation. *The Horse Fair* represents a male space, from which Bonheur was excluded by law and custom, and to which she gained admission by subterfuge (Stanton noted that when she first experimented with transvestism while painting *The Horse Fair*, she was delighted that she "was everywhere taken for a young man and no attention was paid to her comings and goings"<sup>15</sup>). Belying her true power, the queen's movement through space remains "ladylike," while Bonheur's exemplifies the lengths to which an ordinary woman had to go to achieve freedom of movement in a male-defined space. Being unable to challenge directly the ideal represented by Victoria, Bonheur not only had to disguise herself, but she then had to relegate her image of that disguised self to the background of her picture—leaving its subversive message to be read only, perhaps, by a few friends who were in on the joke.



The third factor that bears on interpreting *The Horse Fair* is the discourse and practices of social control over deviant gender behavior. In her attempts to circumvent social norms and forge a more androgynous persona, Bonheur's primary and best-known vehicle was cross-dressing, the symbolic and heavily gendered "arts" of clothing, grooming, and social deportment. In negotiating this public arena, conflicts were inevitable, and the consequences were many and varied—from petty bureaucratic obstacles to amusing misunderstandings to deep embarrassment. She was forced to walk a continual tightrope, with explicit frustration, between self-assertion and conformity.<sup>16</sup>

Transvestism was illegal, and to avoid prosecution Bonheur had to procure an official "permit for transvestism" from the Paris police every six months. This document assumes that there exist strictly polarized norms of gender and dress, that the state must and can regulate the "problem" of individual deviations, and that these are essentially *medical* problems requiring a doctor's signature. At the same time, however, it implicitly acknowledges that there are enough women who require exemptions from these supposedly universal norms to justify printing a standardized form to accommodate them. Through what amounts to sociological plea bargaining, this procedure earned Bonheur the right to dress as she pleased, but only at the price of being officially defined as a medical anomaly in need of treatment and supervision.<sup>17</sup>

This compromise kept Bonheur acutely aware of the disjunction between her desire to create a suitable self-image and the need to avoid social disapproval. When invited to an imperial reception, she felt the need to request advance permission not to wear formal female décolletage, and on two occasions when Eugénie arrived unannounced at By, Bonheur barely managed to hold off her guest's entrance long enough to slip a robe over her pants. Ironically, it was on the second of these visits, when Eugénie personally awarded Bonheur the Légion d'honneur, that the empress repeated a well-known feminist slogan, "Genius has no sex." No doubt she meant to declare an opening up of greater possibilities; but the remark carries the unfortunate double meaning that, in

order to be publicly *recognized* as a genius, Bonheur had to downplay or deny much of her own proscribed sexual identity. It is revealing that her memoir of the episode uses the French phrase "*dissimuler mes vêtements masculins*"—not, that is, to *change* her masculine clothes, but rather to conceal or cover them up.<sup>18</sup>

Social control also operated through the medium of the popular press, which satirized all public deviations with relish. Bonheur admired George Sand, another transvestite creative artist of the time, who was caricatured for her mannish appearance and pseudonym, which rumor associated with an irregular sexual life. Bonheur was subject to the same treatment in the press (1899) [8] and to similar rumors, which she occasionally denied scornfully. Such caricatures exemplify the scrutiny to which her puzzling persona was constantly subjected and the attempt to defuse its radical implications through humor.<sup>19</sup>

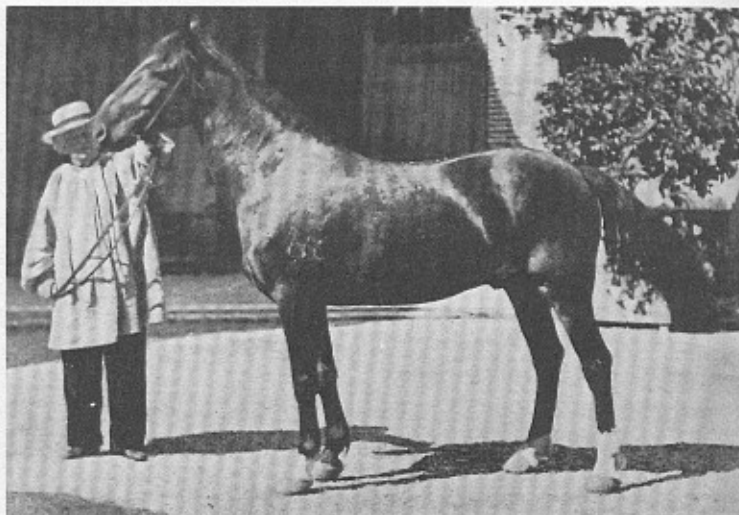


7. Edwin Landseer, *Queen Victoria on Horseback*, 1839. Copyright reserved. Reproduced by gracious permission of H. M. Queen Elizabeth II (Rodney Todd-White & Son).





8. Guillaume, "Le Bouguereau des vaches," *Le Monde illustré*, 1899 (James M. Saslow).



9. Anonymous, *Rosa Bonheur and Solferino*, photograph, 1887. A. Klumpke, *Rosa Bonheur* (James M. Saslow).

In view of such constraints on public expression, more research is needed on the strategies used to carve out a private sphere exempt from surveillance; as Bonheur insisted, "My private life is nobody's concern."<sup>20</sup> One factor that facilitated subcultural self-representation was the advent of amateur photography in the second half of the century. This new medium greatly expanded opportunities for individual image-making, thus opening a gap between public and private artistic arenas and providing an escape valve for imagery not yet permissible in the public sphere. Whereas Bonheur's self-portrayals in *The Horse Fair* and other public paintings necessarily remained unobtrusive, her private photographs offer more overtly deviant images, which corroborate her underlying agenda.

Bonheur and her companions took many photographs that are among the earliest known survivors of what might be called "lesbian genre scenes." In informal snapshots set in the garden and forest at By, Bonheur was captured in male attire sketching, playing with her pets, or, in an image that shows her living out the activity she had fantasized in *The Horse Fair*, leading her horse Solferino (1887) [9].<sup>21</sup> A photograph of Bonheur smoking

a cigarette similarly exposes in private imagery an activity that, as a woman, she was unable to engage in on the street, to her great annoyance.<sup>22</sup>

Klumpke posed a more formal photograph of Bonheur in her studio, wearing her signature smock and pants and crowned with a laurel wreath, and titled it *Old Europe Crowned by Young America* (1898) [10].<sup>23</sup> As with Bonheur's self-portrait in *The Horse Fair*, the contrast to Winterhalter's model woman is obvious not only in dress and action but also, more subtly, in the implied exchange of gazes between sitter and subject, with all that that suggests about power, autonomy, and eroticism. In place of the traditional public image of woman, presented by a male artist to an unnoticed and superior male eye, this homespun allegory privately deifies an active, "masculine" career woman who is gazed at by another female artist and reciprocates the observation with an alert gaze of equal interest and power. Bonheur returned the compliment in an even more densely layered image. Her photograph of Klumpke at work on a painting of Bonheur *en travesti* (1898) [11] is an exquisitely symmetrical expression of the couple's mutual regard, in both the emotional and the optical senses of the terms: it represents one

woman gazing at the androgynized image of another who is gazing at her, each simultaneously making an image of the beloved other.<sup>24</sup>

A strikingly similar instance of such private documentation of female intimacy and cross-dressing occurred at about this same time in New York. Alice Austen (1866–1952), who like Bonheur lived with a lifelong companion, photographed among other subjects the life of her close female friends, who formed a social club that excluded men. A self-portrait [12] shows Austen at the left with two of these friends, all dressed in men's clothes, complete with mustaches and cigars. Austen was financially independent and, like Bonheur, never exhibited or sold her photographs. The two women's oeuvres are concurrent but independent manifestations of the emerging power of a relatively inexpensive and rapid pictorial technology. It made possible private images, created

outside traditional public structures of patronage, audience, and criticism, in which their makers were free to envision alternative roles.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, a fourth level of comparison between Bonheur and her contemporaries involves a more complex and speculative level of iconographic analysis: the interlocked nineteenth-century discourses about animals, women, and sex-gender deviance. If Bonheur's occasional self-images attest to efforts to circumvent social constrictions, the general absence of human subjects from her work—her displacement of the aesthetic gaze onto nonhuman creatures, whom she viewed as extensions of herself—attests to an attempt to transcend those constrictions. Alone among recent critics, Boime rightly emphasizes that there was "a profound connection between her lifestyle, mystical beliefs and fascination for animals." However, it is necessary to revise his denial that



10. Anna Klumpke, *Old Europe Crowned by Young America*, photograph, 1898. A. Klumpke, Rosa Bonheur (James M. Saslow).



11. Rosa Bonheur, *Anna Klumpke at Work*, photograph, 1898. A. Klumpke, Rosa Bonheur (James M. Saslow).