



Charles Bargue and Jean-Leon Gérôme: Drawing Course

By Gerald M. Ackerman

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The Bargue-Gérôme Drawing Course is a complete reprint of a famous, late nineteenth century drawing course. It contains a set of almost two hundred masterful lithographs of subjects for copying by drawing students before they attempt drawing from life or nature. Consequently it is a book that will interest artists, art students, art historians, and lovers and collectors of drawings. It also introduces us to the work and life of a hitherto neglected master: Charles Bargue. The Drawing Course consists of three sections. The first consists of plates drawn after casts, usually of antique examples. Different parts of the body are studied in order of difficulty, until full figures are presented. The second section pays homage to the western school of painting with lithographs after exemplary drawings by Renaissance and modern masters. The third part contains almost sixty academies or drawings after nude male models, all original inventions by Bargue, the lithographer. With great care, the student is introduced to continually more difficult problems in the close observing and recording of nature. Practiced professional artists will see at once the problems of representation that are approached by Bargue, and they will delight in his solutions. Figure painters will copy the plates to keep in tune; so to speak, much as pianists practice the exercises of Czerny before performing Beethoven. Art students will find it a practical and progressive introduction to realistic figure drawing. Art historians can learn by studying these drawings just what was prized in late 19th century figure painting. They will recognize the reliance upon tradition by the use of antique sculptures as models in the first part: Antiquity is here used, not to impose a classical style, but as an aid in seeing the structure of the human body with clarity and intelligence. The result is a convergence of Classicism and Realism. There are no numerical proportional charts, perspective boxes or geometrical schemata to memorize. All the techniques and schemata are developed out of and for the object or person in view. The drawings are splendid; beautiful; not simply products of assiduity, but of careful observation and the wish to transcribe and communicate the beauty of nature and light, as well as the manifold appearances of the human body. These are objectives that will touch and move any careful reader of drawings, and the figurative arts. Charles Bargue started his career as a lithographer of drawings by hack artists for a popular market in comic, sentimental and soft-porn subjects. By working with Gérôme,

and in preparing the plates for the course, Bargue was transformed into a spectacular painter of single figures and intimate scenes; a master of precious details that always remain observation and never became self-conscious virtuosity, of color schemes that unified his composition in exquisite tonal harmonies. The last part of the book is a biography of Bargue, along with a preliminary catalogue of his paintings, accompanied by reproductions of all that have been found and of many of those lost.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Gerald Ackerman was born in California. He completed his studies at the University of California at Berkeley, then at the University of Munich and finally at Princeton, where he received his PhD. For twenty years, he was a professor of art history at Pomona College in California. He is a specialist of Gerome and published studies on other 19th century American and European artists, as well as on the theory of academic art.

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