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On the Assembly of a Catalogue Raisoné of Cycling Paintings

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The author has spent several years researching the representation of the bicycle and related machines in the pictorial arts and has recently submitted a thesis on the subject at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts in Birmingham, England.¹ This paper examines the project of assembling a complete catalogue raisonné of cycling paintings from the early nineteenth century to the present day. Types of work to be included in the catalogue are defined, together with exclusions.

The types of information to be included are considered as well as suitable methods of recording, to facilitate ease of retrieval and cross-reference. It is the eventual aim of the catalogue to make all the information, including scanned-in images, available on CD. The range and varieties of source information are shown, together with examples of completed entries.

Over the last four years of research and writing, I have amassed a large quantity of notes, photographs and pictures of cycles and cycling from many sources. This visual information tells us how the pictorial artist sees both the machine and the activity of cycling and reflects the perception and the social context of cycling throughout its history. As a result of my research, I know a little about where the pictures are and, in many cases, I have obtained reproductions of

them for inclusion in my thesis or for general study. I have therefore decided to assemble a catalogue raisonné of these pictures.

The catalogue raisonné is, at its simplest level, a catalogue of pictures with notes and commentary. Over the years, however, the catalogue raisonné has become formalized within the context of formal academic art history and there are clearly defined structures within which such works are now assembled. Where the purpose of the catalogue is to record the contents of a complete collection or gallery, as at the Barber Institute, there is standard software already available for this purpose which indicates exactly what information should be included. Usually such a catalogue is made to record all the works of a single artist and it is much easier to do this than to

tackle a number of artists or a variety of subjects. I have direct experience of the Encyclopaedia software (in French), which is geared to the single artist, while the Barber Institute uses the Multi-Mimsey software (in English), to record the contents of its galleries and archives. But this commercially available software is far too complex for what I want to do, and goes into it in much greater detail than is required here. So the contents have been scaled down to a single basic file, which can be called up and printed off as hard copy on a single sheet of A4 paper. This can include most of what a general researcher might want to know and allows for the extension of the information where necessary.

The catalogue will start by recording all the paintings of cycling — that is works that were produced as “one-off” images, usually in colour, and usually by the technique of applying paint with a brush to canvas, board or paper. This, however, excludes the great majority of cycling images — no Patterson, no Joseph Pennell, no George Moore, no René Pellarin (Pellos) and no Léo de Budt (the cartoon artist of Thomas Pips in Belgium).² While I accept that these works deserve as much, or more, attention than the relatively small number of paintings which have been made of cycling over the last two centuries, the basic difficulty with a drawing or similar work is simply that it is made to be reproduced, and therefore, while there may be an original, there may also be tens of thousands of copies when it appears as an illustration in a popular newspaper or in a book. In the case of a work such as a lithograph, where the work is drawn directly onto the reproduction stone, and cleaned off again after use, there is unlikely to be a surviving “original” at all. The other major problem with the graphic work of art, particularly when it is produced to record a popular sporting activity, is the sheer quantity of work produced. It has been estimated that Frank Patterson, during his long and busy career, produced some 26,000 pieces of artwork, and I am sure that artists such as René Pellarin (Pellos), and others were equally prolific. In beginning the catalogue with painted works, I am conforming to a usual division of recording artworks. “The Paintings of...” and “The Graphic Works of...” are usual separate titles of catalogue works.

The information which we would wish to record about a work and its maker can be divided into four basic parts, as follows:


Information about the artist

This can extend from the name (or names) of the artist, nationality and dates of birth and death, to dates of active work and where he or she lived and worked. We might also wish to elaborate on the background of the artist and his influences and artistic allegiances, although we must avoid writing a complete biography at this stage.

Information about the picture

The basic required information here is quite simple: the title of the picture (if it has one) or the name by which it is known; the medium (e.g. oil paint on canvas, watercolour, etc.); the dimensions of the picture. It is surprising how important (and how frequently omitted) this piece of information is.

Fig. 12.1. Sample entry for the Béraud painting “Le Châlet du Cycle au Bois de Boulogne.”

VÉLART CATALOGUE RAISONNÉ © Scotford Lawrence 2002.			
Date: 15.08.02	Ref: BER 1900	Grade: 1.	Image: p/c. + M2/16. and others.
Artist: Jean Béraud Nationality: French Dates: 1849-1936			
Title of Painting: Le Châlet du Cycle au Bois de Boulogne. Medium: Oil on canvas Dimensions: approx. 80 x 50(h) Date: c. 1900.			
Provenance and Location: Musée Carnavalet, Paris. Museum of the City of Paris.			
Source of this Information: Seen at Musée Carnavalet, etc. 1998.			
Bibliography and Notes: Archetypal genre painting of its period. See other Béraud works of fashionable Parisian street scenes, etc. from this period — <i>Bal à l'Hotel Caillebotte, Dimanche à l'église de St. Philippe de Roule</i> , etc.			
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The date of the picture

Where an artist neither signs nor dates his pictures, one is fortunate to be studying cycling paintings in that the content of the picture — the details of the machine and riders' costumes — make reasonably accurate dating far easier than it is in many other fields of art historical study.

Provenance and location

It is at this point that we leave the realm of cycling, and indeed of art history itself, and enter the realm of Sherlock Holmes and Inspector Maigret. Sometimes one is lucky, particularly if the painting is in the public domain and is to be seen in an art gallery accessible to the general public, but even here there can be problems. Surprisingly, there are public art galleries across Europe which do not actually know what paintings they have and have had to be persuaded to “go and look” to see if they still have obscure works held in store, or tucked away in the less visited corners of their galleries. Others will tell you what they have, often grudgingly, and then refuse to give information on the work or even supply a useable reproduction of it.

In some cases paintings are produced, exhibited or seen in the public domain and then sold, simply to disappear. There is no obligation for a private owner to let it be known that he has this or that painting. In some cases it is desirable, for security reasons, that this information not be readily available. Finally when all efforts have proved fruitless, the compiler of the catalogue raisonné falls back on those two well-used phrases, “In a private collection” or “Present whereabouts unknown.”

Within this section some history and provenance must be given, not only where the picture is now, but also where it has been throughout its existence. For this purpose, we resort to catalogues of exhibitions and sales and to the mention of the work in books and other written works about the artist, the period or the subject. This leads inevitably to the fourth category normally included in a formal catalogue raisonné.

Sales, ownership and valuations.


Art is a commodity and a tradeable medium; any work of art attracts an estimate of its market price and sale value. It is usual to include a section in a catalogue raisonné on the sale history and the history of

prices and values of art works. While this is an area I view with some ethical distaste, it needs to be mentioned because one of the most important sources of tracking pictures is the catalogues of the major art auction houses, Sothebys, Christies, Bonhams, etc.

The catalogue document has the following sections:

- Date: This is the date on which we are using the document.
- Reference. This is a simple code made up of the first three letters of the artist's name, and the date of the painting.
- Grade: A judgmental, personal category which can be described as follows:

Fig. 12.2. Sample entry for the Berserik painting “Rolrijder.”

VÉLART CATALOGUE RAISONNÉ © Scotford Lawrence 2002.			
Date: 29.06.02	Ref: BER 1978	Grade: 1	Image: Photo from Museum voor Moderne Kunst Arnhem Netherlands
Artist: Hermanus Berserik Nationality: Dutch Dates: b. Den Haag 1921.			
Title of Painting: Rolrijder Medium: Acrylic on canvas Dimensions: 100(h) x 110 Date: 1978.			
Provenance and Location: In Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Arnhem.			
Source of this Information: Correspondence. 1997 and visit 1998.			
Bibliography and Notes: Exhibition catalogue: <i>Hermanus Berserik schilderijen, tekeningen, grafiek 1968-1979</i> . Gemeentemuseum Arnhem 1979. Also unpublished sketchbooks of the artist held at Museum voor Moderne Kunst. Also <i>Bike Culture Quarterly</i> No.5 p.42. 1985.			
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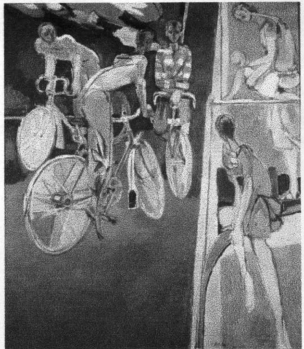
Grade 1. A work which is primarily about cycling and makes a significant contribution to our visual repertoire of cycling images and the viewer's perception of cycling.

Grade 2. A picture with a significant cycling content but of a more general nature, such as a genre scene, street scene with cyclists, or a work where the cycling content is a reflection of a general view on society.

Grade 3. A picture that has a cyclist or cyclists in it but is not about cycling per se.

- Image: This is for internal information and usually contains a reference to my own catalogue of

Fig. 12.3. Sample entry for the Robert Medley painting "Bicyclists against a blue background."

VÉLART CATALOGUE RAISONNÉ © Scotford Lawrence 2002.		
Date: 21.06.02	Ref: MED 1950	Grade: 1
Artist: Robert Medley Nationality: English Dates: 1905-1994		Image: Photograph York City Art Gallery
Title of Painting: Bicyclists against a Blue Background Medium: Oil on canvas Dimensions: Est. 120 x 160 Date: 1950		
Provenance and Location: York City Art Gallery. Supplied from Exhibition <i>50 Artists for '51</i> exhibition – part of the Festival of Britain Exhibition 1951.		
Source of this Information: Correspondence with York City Art Gallery and book, autobiography <i>Drawn from Life</i> . Faber and Faber. 1983. p.205-6.		
Bibliography and Notes: Seen at Barbican exhibition 18.02.02. Bigger and more colourful than the reproductions suggest!		
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photographic negatives or even to a good reproduction of the picture concerned, in a book or other work. Whenever possible I hope to be able to obtain a reproducible image of the work and to scan it into the document, so that on this single sheet, we have a brief, concise and succinct description of a cycling painting.

- Artist: This is straightforward, except for the fact that we have to accept that we do not know the identity of every artist, so inevitably, entries such as "Unknown? French, late C19th." will appear, but can be subject to later revision.
- Title: This is the information about the work itself. Its title, what it is, how big it is and when it was produced
- Provenance: Where it is and, if known, how it got there.
- Source and Bibliography: These are extensions of the historical and saleroom information, mentions in exhibition catalogues, in works of art history and reviews of exhibitions in general and in art journalism.

There are some hundreds of cycling paintings already known and three examples are given which typify the assembled information of the catalogue raisonné:

- Jean Béraud: "Le chalet du cycle au Bois de Boulogne," ca. 1896.
- Hermanus Berserik: "Rolrijder," 1978.
- Robert Medley: "Bicyclists against a Blue Background," 1950.

This is a project arising directly from my work at the Barber Institute over the last four years. It is not a function of this paper to enter into a discussion of the "why" of the art of the bicycle, and I do not think that an assembly of cycling and sports enthusiasts could be regarded as having disinterested views on the subject. However, it is inevitable that, as the catalogue grows, we will be confronted again with the question as to why the general, classical painters have so infrequently painted pictures of cycling and bicycles. But today, we confine ourselves to the "what" and the "how" of the art of the cycle. When or whether the catalogue will be completed remains

open to question. It is inevitable that, when I have catalogued all the works that I already know about, others will continue to be found so that the whole project is likely to continue and be on-going.

I would like to enlist your help in this project. If you know of works that appear to fit the criteria I have given — paintings of cycling — perhaps you would let me know. You can do this by going to the website of the National Cycle Museum:
<http://www.cyclemuseum.org.uk>. Click on to Velart

Catalogue, and you will find a printable form, or an e-mailable alternative, by which you can communicate your information. It is in this way that I get to know about paintings I have not previously been aware of, and it is always possible that particular works, however obscure they may appear to be, may make a major contribution to our understanding of the relationship between art images and perception of the cycle.

Endnotes

1 “The Art of the Cycle: An Examination of the Pictorial Image of the Cycle and Cycling in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.”

2 Editor’s Note: In effect, the author is excluding all images created for commercial or advertising purposes.