The New Criterion

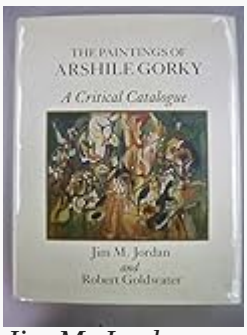
Books September 1982

The art of the catalogue

by *E. V. Thaw*

A review of *The Paintings of Arshile Gorky: A Critical Catalogue* by Jim M. Jordan

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Jim M. Jordan

The Paintings of Arshile Gorky: A Critical Catalogue

New York University Press, 480 pages, $135.00

The scholarly enterprise of compiling a "catalogue raisonné," which attempts to provide us with a definitive listing of every work in an artist's oeuvre, is less than a century old, and in the present era of over-production of art books it appears to be in greater vogue than ever. Its utility is self-evident, but only, of course, if the author-scholar undertaking the task brings the requisite objectivity and reliability to its execution. An unreliable catalogue raisonné compiled with a clear bias, a poor eye, or too insecure a grasp of the subject can wreak havoc on the study and collecting of an artist for many years. The intense study of an artist is in fact the primary purpose that is meant to be served by such an analytical compendium of every scrap of an artist's work that is known to exist. But it serves the art market as well. The collector wants to know and the dealer or auctioneer must be able to answer: "Is the Daumier in Maison, the Corot in Robaut, the Renoir in Daulte, the Picasso in Zervos, the Degas in Lemoisne?" If the work is not included in the standard catalogue a lot of explaining is necessary.

This kind of art book comes in many styles, from the luxurious multi-volume limited editions favored by the French to the cheap but useful spin-offs produced by Rizzoli. Sometimes the catalogue is simply appended to a monograph—as in Will Grohmann's *Kandinsky*, for instance, or Jacques Dupin's *Miró*. Although for the most part books of this sort encompass only paintings, a few encompass drawings and other media as well; the catalogues for Daumier, Lautrec, and Seurat are examples.

Generally, the artist will have been dead for some time before a catalogue raisonné is undertaken.

Generally, the artist will have been dead for some time before a catalogue raisonné is undertaken. There are exceptions, though: Picasso saw much of his work published in many volumes by Zervos before his death, and today Jean Dubuffet is regularly recording every piece from his studio in "*fascicules*" of his own catalogue, which he publishes himself. For the deceased artist who has left a wife, a family, and an estate—the usual situation for American painters of the twentieth century—cooperation from the family and access to the estate, its holdings and its records, are essential to the catalogue. Indeed, such cooperation, once given, is conceived of as the "imprimatur" of authority for the book and especially for its judgments concerning the inclusion or rejection of certain works. It is well known, of course, that artists and their survivors often prove to be unreliable sources about the work they have been so close to—for reasons both innocent and mischievous. Still, they remain the witnesses whose evidence must be sought and evaluated. When a large body of work survives in an artist's estate, however haphazard the accumulation, it provides us with much information that cannot be deduced from the better known work, now exhibited and collected, which left the studio and got out into the world.

In serving its primary purpose—the intensive study of the artist—the catalogue raisonné seldom tells us much about those works we already know, that is, about the famous paintings upon which a reputation rests. But it tells us an enormous amount about beginnings, failed paintings, transitional works, and the influences from other artists. Ideally, it affords that overview of a whole career which shows that any artist worth our attention is a more complex and various creature than the knowledge based only on well-known paintings suggests.

It is in this regard that *The Paintings of Arshile Gorky: A Critical Catalogue*, by Jim M. Jordan and Robert Goldwater, is a welcome and useful addition to the field. Simply in terms of its design and organization, it falls somewhere between a multi-volume production and the small-plate appendage to a monograph. Indeed, it was originally planned as a book *about* Gorky by Goldwater, to be accompanied by a catalogue by Jordan. Unfortunately, Goldwater's untimely death in 1973 deprived us of that book. The placing of his name on the present volume is more an act of homage

than an acknowledgement of authorship. His only contribution here is a short, lucid book review written for the *Saturday Review* in 1962.

Jim M. Jordan, chairman of the art department at Dartmouth College, has compiled the core of the book, which is the photographic record of every painting by Gorky he could find, together with a record of ownership, exhibitions, and publications. This valuable, objective, and critically neutral task, which has been executed with the full cooperation of Gorky's widow and with access to the estate, seems to have been thoroughly done. Its usefulness is diminished, however, by occasional coy mannerisms, stylistic inconsistencies, and careless citations. The provenance of a painting, for instance, which means its previous ownership history, is taken by Jordan to include the present owner, who is also listed separately. The works in the estate are catalogued this way:

> Collection: Private collection
> Provenance: Estate of Arshile Gorky; private collection
>
> This really does not clarify a great deal. Then, too, dealers are quite often left out of the provenance. Even Xavier Fourcade, the agent representing the estate and one of the people credited in the introduction with having supported the book financially, is not mentioned as the source for the recent purchases by the National Gallery in Washington. A private dealer is listed as Mr. Harold Diamond, but a collector is given only as Edward Root. The world-famous Italian collector, Carlo Frua de Angeli, appears as "Fruart d'Angeli."

There are a few other grounds for criticism. The overview of Gorky's artistic production is somewhat marred by its being organized sometimes by date, sometimes by subject matter. Year follows year properly and cogently for a while; then suddenly we find Gorky's figure paintings lumped together irrespective of their year, and later his flower paintings. Except for a list of titles, the catalogue has no index—and indexes are enormously important to books of this sort. So are illustrations: the book's black and white plates are only adequate for identification; they are not handsome in themselves. And the book's ten color plates are merely a nod in the direction of the profuse color reproductions the public expects these days in any art book.

The Paintings of Arshile Gorky contains a long explanatory text by Jordan, which is really a period by period descriptive survey of Gorky's career and work emphasizing his early and transitional themes, which are less known. As Jordan points out, the fully developed, surrealist abstract paintings of the last four years have been amply discussed.1 While full of useful facts and thoughtful insights about Gorky's struggles and the influences that shaped his work, this introduction argues against an enemy that just isn't there.

Gorky, as we all knew long before this catalogue appeared—and indeed, as even his friends remarked—was a slavish imitator of artists he admired or whose work he thought held the keys to modernism. His versions of Cézanne, his cribs from Braque, and his long concentration on Picasso go beyond the normal "influences" that are discernible in the development of any artist who is

mastering his craft. In Gorky's case the imitation is often so crass as to be embarrassing, and there are paintings in this catalogue which in other contexts would simply be termed "fake" Picassos or Cézannes.

Although Gorky painted some of the most truly beautiful paintings produced in New York in his time, he was never an original artist in the fullest sense.

While fully acknowledging this pattern of derivation and dependency, particularly in the case of Picasso, Jordan argues that Gorky was not really copying, but "absorbing." When we arrive at the mature last period, however—the 1943-47 span which saw the production of such Gorky masterworks as *Betrothal*, *Calendars*, and *Agony*—the clear and pervasive influence of Miró and, to a lesser extent, of Matta is only grudgingly acknowledged. This I believe to be a serious mistake. A comparison of many of Gorky's late, culminating paintings with the Mirós of the 1930s seen in New York exhibitions or illustrated in most of the same publications from which Gorky also derived his "Picassos" demonstrates the clear assimilation of nearly identical forms and pictorial strategies. Although Gorky painted some of the most truly beautiful paintings produced in New York in his time, he was never an original artist in the fullest sense. In his eagerness to keep *au courant* with what was happening in Paris he was a kind of artistic Vicar of Bray.

Nor, despite his close association with other artists of the New York School, was Gorky really caught up in the "action painting" of the great generation of American painters who flowered after the Second World War. Both this catalogue and other recent literature on Gorky reveal how deliberately he worked on those apparently "spontaneous" and "informal" paintings. We now know that he painted closely repetitive versions of many of them, almost line for line. Indeed, one of the discoveries of this book is yet another version of the paintings *Betrothal i* and *Betrothal ii* of 1947, which we were already astounded to find so similar for an artist of this period. Shades of Delacroix or Chardin!

About all of this—Gorky's derivations and his place vis-à-vis the Abstract Expressionists—it is Robert Goldwater who gives the best account, in the two pages of his reprinted book review. It is an intelligent assessment of Gorky and his real achievement, without apologies or polemics, directed implicitly at those who would make of Gorky either more or less than he was:

> Gorky's career presents three apparent enigmas: the paradoxical fusion, in his impressively theatrical personality, of public performance and private emotion, external pretense and internal sincerity; the unseemly length of his pre-1943 apprenticeship in the shadow of Picasso's art, a period too long for an artist who possessed the powers of individual creation he later showed; and the disturbing preservation, within the personal vision of the last years, of obvious features of the near and immediate sources from which he had composed that vision—the simultaneous presence of derivation and originality.

Whatever its flaws, such a laborious compilation of an important artist's life work as *The Paintings of Arshile Gorky* confers a special distinction on its author which no quibbling review can remove.

Just as Mozart's compositions are known by their Köchel listings, so will the paintings of Arshile Gorky—whether cited in exhibition catalogues, serious studies, or in museum inventories—be known by their "Jordan number." That is the real reward for what has clearly been a scholarly labor of love.

1. Unfortunately, Jordan's text must have been completed before the appearance of Harry Rand's *Arshille Gorky: The Implication of Symbols* (Allenheld & Schram, 1981), which reaches many conclusions about Gorky's work and its content different from Jordan's. Go back to the text.

E. V. Thaw (1927–2018) was a preeminent art dealer, collector, and philanthropist.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 1 Number 1 , on page 82

https://newcriterion.com/issues/1982/9/the-art-of-the-catalogue