
Raffaëlli, Jean-François

(b Paris, April 20, 1850; d Paris, Feb 11, 1924).

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French painter, sculptor and printmaker. He turned to painting in 1870, after his early interest in music and theatre, and took the works of Camille Corot, Jean-Léon Gérôme, Ferdinand Roybet and Mariano Fortuny y Marsal as models for his own work. Raffaëlli painted a landscape that was accepted by the Paris Salon jury of 1870. He enrolled in Gérôme's atelier in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris, in October 1871, but his three months there were his only formal training. Together with a few landscapes the major part of his early production consisted of costume pictures, primarily with subjects in Louis XIII dress, such as *L'Attaque sous bois* (1873; Verdun, Mus. Princerie).

In 1876 Raffaëlli produced a powerful, realistic portrait of a Breton peasant family, the *Family of Jean-le-Boîteux, Peasants of Plougasnou (Finistère)* (Le Quesnoy, Hôtel de Ville), which signalled a new direction in his art. The portrait was praised by the influential critic Louis-Edmond Duranty. By the late 1870s, Raffaëlli's career as a realist artist was launched with the support of Duranty and other critics such as J.-K. Huysmans. At the insistence of Edgar Degas, Raffaëlli was included in the Impressionist group shows of 1880 and 1881, even though his art was stylistically dissimilar. His works in these two shows aroused the attention of critics, who showered the artist with much attention and praise.

Raffaëlli focused his attention during this period almost exclusively on the newly expanding suburbs of Paris, where he had settled. He scrupulously recorded the inhabitants of these industrial zones along the Seine: vagabonds, absinthe drinkers, *petits industriels*, workers, *petits bourgeois* and, in particular, rag-pickers. Departing from the traditional picturesque image of the rag-picker in 19th-century literature and art, Raffaëlli endowed this marginal member of society with a special meaning; he regarded the rag-picker as a symbol of alienated individualism in modern industrial society, the expression of his own positivistic outlook.

Raffaëlli's philosophical bent led him to articulate a theory of realism that he christened *caractérisme*. He hoped to set himself apart from those unthinking, so-called realist artists whose art provided the viewer with only a literal depiction of nature. His careful observation of man in his milieu paralleled the anti-aesthetic, anti-romantic approach of the literary Naturalists, such as Zola and Huysmans. Greatly influenced by positivism and, in particular, the philosopher Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine, Raffaëlli defined the realist artist as one duty-bound to reveal the essential character of various aspects of reality, including the nature of contemporary society and its individual personalities, together with the artist's state of mind.



Jean-François Raffaëlli: *The Fletcher Mansion, New York City*, oil on canvas, 23 3/4 x 32 in. (60.3 x 81.3 cm) (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. Isaac D. Fletcher Collection, Bequest of Isaac D. Fletcher, 1917, Accession ID:17.120.228); photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110001814>

In the early 1890s Raffaëlli moved from the suburbs into Paris itself and concentrated on painting more public views of the capital. As his works enjoyed acceptance and brought him increased prosperity, Raffaëlli's positivistic views assumed a buoyant and self-confident optimism (see fig.), evidenced by his light-hearted scenes of Parisian monuments and boulevards. In later years he made picturesque views of the French countryside and seaports, such as *Port of La Rochelle* (1914-15; Paris, Louvre). At this time, Raffaëlli's major activity was printmaking in colour. He introduced a new technique, whereby up to five plates for one print were executed not in aquatint or wash but in drypoint hatching. Though not a professional illustrator, Raffaëlli occasionally provided material for newspapers, reviews and books, primarily in the 1880s and 1890s. His subjects, drawn mostly from the industrial suburban milieu, popular city entertainments and street life, accompanied texts by Huysmans, the Goncourt brothers and Victor Hugo among others. One of his most ambitious projects, *Les Types de Paris* (1889), a profusely illustrated album of light-hearted articles written by his literary friends, serves as a retrospective of Raffaëlli's activities as an illustrator of Parisian life.

Like his prints, Raffaëlli's sculpture paralleled and sometimes faithfully reproduced the industrial suburban compositions of his paintings. He exhibited at least 20 different pieces throughout his career. Many used his inventive technique of bronze backgroundless bas-relief. No sculptures are known today and only a handful have been photographed (see Alexandre, pp. 165-70).

Writings

Etude des mouvements de l'art moderne et du beau caractériste (Paris, 1884)

Bibliography

A. Alexandre: *Jean-François Raffaëlli: Peintre, graveur et sculpteur* (Paris, 1909)

L. Delteil: 'Jean-François Raffaëlli', *Le Peintre graveur illustré*, 16 (Paris, 1923)

B. S. Fields: *Jean-François Raffaëlli (1850-1924): The Naturalist Artist* (diss., New York, Columbia U., 1979)

See also

France, §iii, 5(vi): Painting graphic arts, c 1814–c 1914: The avant-garde abstraction

External resources

Raffalli, Jean-François: The Flower Vendor, National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC) <<http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pinfo?Object=46247+0+none>>

Raffalli, Jean-François: The Fletcher Mansion, New York City, Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) <<http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110001814>>

Raffalli, Jean-François: Sketch of a Man Having just Painted his Fence, Mackenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina (Regina, SK) <<http://www.mackenzieartgallery.sk.ca/discover/items/2313/sketch-for-man-having-just-painted-his-fence>>

Raffalli, Jean-François: La Demoiselle d'Honneur, 1901, Telfair Museum of Art (Savannah, GA) <<http://www.telfair.org/ec/collections/collection/paintings/demoiselle.html>>

Raffalli, Jean-François: Notre Dame Seen from the Quai de la Tournelle, c. 1897-1902, Cleveland Museum of Art (Cleveland, OH) <<http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1953.649>>