

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

France Nerlich

exhibition review of

François-Auguste Biard peintre voyageur and *The Life of Others*

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 20, no. 3 (Autumn 2021)

Citation: France Nerlich, exhibition review of *François-Auguste Biard peintre voyageur* and *The Life of Others*, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 20, no. 3 (Autumn 2021), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2021.20.3.25>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).

Accessed: June 03 2023



François-Auguste Biard peintre voyageur
Maison Victor Hugo, Paris
November 5, 2020–April 11, 2021

The Life of Others
Nord Norsk Kunst Museum, Tromsø
May 2–August 29, 2021

Catalogue:
Gérard Audinet, ed.,
François-Auguste Biard peintre voyageur.
Paris: Paris Musées, 2020.
168 pp.; 100 color illus.; selected bibliography; exhibition checklist.
€29.90 softcover
ISBN: 978–2–7596–0499–9

The Maison Victor Hugo in Paris (MVH) had planned to open the first show organized under its new exhibition policy, devoted to the French painter François-Auguste Biard (1799–1882), in November 2020. On October 29 of that year, the French government declared a new lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. On April 15, 2021, the exhibition was dismantled without the museum having been able to reopen its doors in the meantime. It is therefore an invisible exhibition that will be discussed here.^[1]

Perhaps the exhibition's closure was the revenge of Victor Hugo, who was seized, on Biard's orders, *in flagrante delicto*, committing adultery with Biard's wife, Léonie d'Aunet, on July 5, 1845, in a hotel in the passage Saint-Roch in Paris. Victor Hugo was let go, thanks to his status as a peer of France, while Léonie was imprisoned and then transferred to various convents, before regaining her freedom, obtaining a legal separation from her husband, and continuing her affair with the poet until his exile. The correspondence between Léonie d'Aunet and Victor Hugo is among the most passionate and sensual of all time; it marked the literary history and high-society gossip of the nineteenth century.^[2] In this context, François-Auguste Biard remained for a long time a vaudeville figure, the ugly and jealous husband, the mediocre painter, the deceived and impotent man. What crystallized in the art historiography were the severe judgments of Théophile Gautier, who found in Biard's work

tripe capable of pleasing only a vulgar and uncultured public. Too interested in the subjects, and worthy only of laughter, as shown in many of the caricatures in the exhibition, Biard's work was for Théophile Gautier the antithesis of art, which, he felt, should be turned towards its own means and language. Biard's name has thus gradually disappeared from the annals of art history, but some of his works have survived and are used to illustrate a wide range of subjects, as is the case with his striking image of the Salon public, *Four O'Clock at the Salon* (1847, Paris, Musée du Louvre), which humorously explores the gestures and expressions of the crowd at the Louvre. Biard also brought back from his many journeys new types of landscapes, especially from the Far North. He was one of the first to depict ice landscapes around 1840. His 1841 masterpiece *Magdalena Bay* (Paris, Musée du Louvre) has so durably embodied the macabre imagination around the expeditions in the polar regions that it was recently used as the cover for Dan Simmons' novel, *The Terror* (Little, Brown and Company, 2007). Finally, Biard's *Proclamation of the Freedom of Blacks in the Colonies* (1849, Versailles, Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon) has long haunted French history books addressing the abolition of slavery in France in 1848 and celebrating its principal advocate Victor Schoelcher.

However, it turns out that—like these three images—the work of Biard is polymorphic and difficult to apprehend. Over the past fifteen years, Biard's paintings have been included in exhibitions of various sizes, though these have tended to favor his travel-inspired paintings, his *peinture de mœurs*, and his depictions of black models.^[3] Nineteenth-century specialists were therefore curious and even impatient when they heard that the MVH was preparing the first retrospective exhibition ever devoted to Biard. It is all the more unfortunate that the show remained invisible because, as Vincent Gille, curator at the MVH and one of the two curators of the exhibition, states in the catalogue, Biard's work remains highly difficult to access. Gille and Baptiste Henriot, an independent historian who is currently preparing a catalogue raisonné of Biard's work,^[4] carried out remarkable preparatory research for the exhibition. Gille speculates that only about half of Biard's painted work is known today, probably less than ten percent of his travel sketches, and nothing of the photographs taken during his stay in Brazil. The two curators found many works in museum storerooms, and the MVH sometimes initiated their restoration so that they could be included in the exhibition. Gille and Henriot have also discovered works that had been placed in public buildings and then totally forgotten, such as the very large *Magdalena Bay, Spitsbergen, by 79° 35 m. lat. north* (1841, Centre National des Arts Plastiques), which has been on deposit since 1925 at the Tribunal de commerce in Bergerac (Dordogne). The two curators managed to secure the contribution of art dealers—Biard's work still circulates on the art market—who have loaned major pieces to the exhibition, such as the sizable *Hospital for the Insane: A Young Girl Does Not Recognize Her Parents* (1833, Galerie de Bayser; see fig. 10), of which the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen has a small, possibly preparatory version (ca. 1833, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen). Finally, the two curators have been able to obtain numerous loans from private collectors, which allowed for the presence of completely unseen works.

The considerable effort put into the preparation of the exhibition, undermined by the several periods of lockdown, deserves the utmost recognition. Its invisibility unfortunately prohibited specialists from seeing the works in person and fully appreciating their visual and material qualities. Some also have weaknesses of structure or facture that are only evident when seen directly. While the exhibition is both exciting and stimulating, it also raises many questions and, of course, certain frustrations. Some of the hangings are questionable, and

the catalogue does not seem quite up to the level of the investigative work done to prepare the show. It is possible that the degraded working conditions of 2020 complicated the production of the catalogue. What is needed above all is to highlight the huge contribution of this exhibition in order to capitalize on it and prepare for the future.

Beyond Biography—Biard's Studio

While the exhibition was entitled *François-Auguste Biard Traveler Painter* (fig. 1), the subject of the exhibition turned out to be richer than this implies, and the subject of travel was left relatively uninterrogated. The exhibition was organized in four thematic sections, highly constrained by the historical spaces of the Maison Victor Hugo, but elegantly staged by the Tovar studio.



Fig. 1, Installation view showing the entrance to the exhibition *François-Auguste Biard Peintre Voyageur*, Maison de Victor Hugo, Paris, 2021 © Paris Musées, R. Chipault. [\[larger image\]](#)

The first room was dedicated to a sort of biographical introduction, while the second room brought together quite spectacularly the landscapes of the North. The third room gathered works under the theme of travel, and the last one genre painting of various sizes and formats. In most of the rooms, display cases offered a handful of historical documents, autographs of the artist, newspapers and journals, engravings and printed images, illustrations, as well as many caricatures.

The first section could hardly avoid the love affair between Biard's wife Léonie d'Aunet and Victor Hugo, in whose apartment the exhibition unfolded, with one side of a gallery devoted to passionate letters, portraits, publications, and so forth. On the opposite wall the visitor could see a series of self-portraits of Biard, from the intriguing drawing showing him as haggard (1845, Bibliothèque Nationale de France), evocative of Courbet's madman, to the very well-behaved portraits of a pudgy fellow with a neatly trimmed and parted hair (fig. 2). At the threshold of the real start of the show, a small, unpretentious painting caught the eye, programmatically concentrating Biard's spirit with its strengths and weaknesses.



Fig. 2, Installation view showing the first room with a series of portraits, at the exhibition *François-Auguste Biard Peintre Voyageur*, Paris, 2021 © Paris Musées, R. Chipault. [\[larger image\]](#)

My Studio (1866, collection M.R.; fig. 3) is a small painting (46.6 x 61.6 cm), but it depicts great action. Slightly off-center on the right, a painter is seated in front of a huge canvas on which he is depicting a melee involving men in helmets, feathers, and turbans, and animated by dramatic gestures and drapery. The painter turns his back to us and looks at himself in a mirror, in which his reflection appears to us as a portrait. He wears a helmet with a red plume similar to the one worn by the man in his painting who is about to deliver a fatal blow to a blinded victim. The painter scrutinizes his image in the mirror, suspending his gesture with brush raised and palette in hand, apparently copying what he sees. His reflection, which appears clearer than the figure painted on the canvas, looks at him directly and almost with astonishment, as if he were discovering himself for the first time. Perched on a high stool, knees bent, and feet placed on the highest bar, the painter has nothing heroic about him. The almost huddled position is reminiscent of the caricature by Benjamin Roubaud showing Biard disguised as a polar bear to paint among bears (fig. 4). The studio is full to bursting. Behind the painter's mirror on the left, a mixed public composed of two priests, some elegant women, and children of different social classes, presses in. On the left, a gentleman respectfully greets a wooden mannequin. His glasses are apparently not strong enough to allow him to distinguish between animate and inanimate beings. The elder of the two clergymen is trying to hide a nude from the eyes of his young colleague. A little girl sits in the foreground, in front of an antique bust, a drawing pad on her lap, watching and mimicking the gesture of a richly dressed girl laughing at the sight of the painter. To the far left a young boy in a blue work coat is bent over laughing as he sees one of the elegant bourgeois women sitting on a well-stocked palette. In front of the large canvas on the right, an assistant dutifully prepares the color palette for the master, wedged between the color box and the standing lamp.



Fig. 3, François-Auguste Biard, *My Studio*, 1866. Oil on canvas. Collection M. R. © collection particulière / Photo D. R. [\[larger image\]](#)

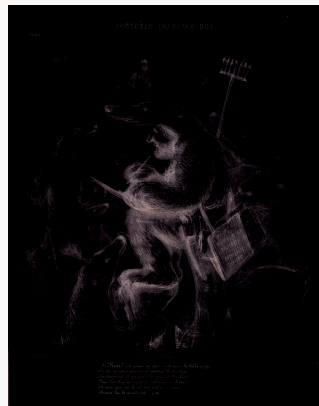


Fig. 4, Benjamin Roubaud, “Si Biard est peint en ours, c’est pour la belle page” (If Biard painted as a bear, it is for a beautiful page) in *Panthéon charivarique* in *Le Charivari*, September 11, 1840, ninth year, no. 256. Lithograph. Artwork in the public domain; courtesy of the Paris Museums and Museum Carnavalet per the licensing agreement, www.parismuseescollections.paris.fr/. [\[larger image\]](#)

Biard pokes fun as much at the art world as at himself (particularly when we consider that the studio depicted is not necessarily his own, the title of the painting notwithstanding). Should we take seriously a grandiloquent history painting, presenting a tragic subject from an ancient era, composed by an artist in disguise in the middle of a laughing and chatting crowd? Life and art are intimately intertwined, the painter’s body merges with those of his characters, and he himself becomes the subject of a portrait-like image and de facto genre scene. The painter and the girl reproduce in their own bodies the gestures they observe and want to trace; they are the mediators of lived experiences, which Biard often claimed was at the core of his work. Finally, his painting, though small, is filled with a wide range of references. It resonates with the works of Thomas Couture recalling the latter’s influence as a teacher. But above all, it invokes the memory of another, much larger studio, that of Gustave Courbet (*The Studio of the Artist: A Real Allegory of the Last Seven Years of My Artistic Life*, 1855, Musée d’Orsay), which summoned two worlds composed of real and imaginary figures on either side of an easel, where the painter depicts himself creating a great landscape. Biard

re-enacts quite well the ambiguous game that characterizes Courbet's way of painting—what Delacroix referred to as “*amphibologie*”.[5]

This small workshop thus offers a summary of Biard's self-mockery, a permanent and very conscious *mise en abyme* of his own practice, an ironic look at great art, a taste for staging and gags, a desire to laugh at everything at all costs. In short, a relationship that is at the same time totally distanced from painting, in which he never developed a singular style, and deeply embodied in personal experience, which was at the heart of his practice. Finally, one may wonder whether the subject represented on the canvas is not the massacre of an Indian chief by representatives of Western and Eastern civilizations; beyond the comic charge, we may glimpse his bitter conviction that mankind was destroying the living world, a conclusion to which Biard had been led by his various experiences around the world and especially in Brazil.

The Paintings of the Great North

The beautiful room of the paintings of the Great North offered a stunning opportunity to embrace in one glance several of these bluish landscapes realized between Biard's return from Spitsbergen in 1839–40[6] and later landscapes of the 1860s (figs. 5, 6). Despite the generally blue tones, this subject is interpreted in a surprisingly wide variety of ways in individual paintings—from the magisterial *Magdalena Bay* from the Louvre, a condensation of the polar sublime, to the spectacular and unreadable visual chaos of sharp icy concretions in *View of the Icy Ocean, Walrus Fishing by Greenlanders* (1841, Château-musée), from the dramatic and theatrical scene of *Norwegian Hunters in Spitsbergen* (1842, Baron Gérard Museum of Art and History) to the more realistic views such as the *Magdalena Bay, Spitsbergen, by 79° 35 m. lat. north* from Bergerac (fig. 7). In this large painting (163 x 220 cm), which displays a whitish view of the bay, Biard focuses his attention on two figures: the painter and his wife. In the foreground, the painter, wrapped in his bearskin, faces us. Crouched with his color box on the lap, he is painting—we actually see the palette and the painter's stick to suggest painting rather than drawing—a rifle at his side. He is sitting on the black rocks of the shore, steps away from a few walruses, who watch him curiously. The snow spreads out behind him to cover smoothly the black rocks. Behind him, a woman climbs the rocks to warn him about the walruses, which he seems not to have noticed. The figure is very evocative of Léonie d'Aunet, as described in her own astonishing account of the adventurous trip to Spitzbergen with her husband-to-be.[7] In the distance, a corvette is anchored in the bay. Biard suggests here the isolation and absorption of the painter in front of nature and it is precisely this that he puts before the eyes of the spectator—a matter of absorption.



Fig. 5, Installation view showing the second exhibition room of *François-Auguste Biard Peintre Voyageur*. From left to right: *Le Baiser dans les glaces* (Kiss on the ice), 1868. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Art et d'Histoire Baron Gérard, Bayeux. *Magdalena Bay, vue prise de la presqu'île des Tombeaux, au nord du Spitzberg; effet d'aurore boréale* (Magdalena Bay, view taken from the Peninsula of the Graves, North of Spitsbergen; Aurora Borealis effect), 1841. Oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris. *Bay of Magdalen, Spitsbergen, by 79° 35 m. lat. North*, 1844. Oil on canvas. Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris. © Paris Musées, R. Chipault. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 6, Installation view showing the second exhibition room. On the left: *Vue de l'océan Glacial: pêche aux morses par des Groenlandais* (View of the Glacial Ocean: Greenlanders hunting walrus), 1841. Oil on canvas. Château-musée, Dippe. The others see Fig. 5. © Paris Musées, R. Chipault. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 7, Installation view with François-Auguste Biard, *Bay of Magdalen, Spitsbergen, by 79° 35 m. lat. North*, 1841. Oil on canvas. © Paris Musées, R. Chipault. [\[larger image\]](#)

The curators were able to bring together the paintings commissioned by King Louis-Philippe of his stay in Lapland in 1795, when he was the Duke of Orleans and in exile. These reflect Biard's own experiences among the Sami people. *Pastor Laestadius Instructing the Lapps* (1841, Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum), excellently hung, could be looked at from close up and then from afar, allowing the different effects to be appreciated. Biard placed the Lapps at the bottom of a snowy crevasse, in front of the stern preacher, whom he had met. Biard invites a close-up look at the figures' carefully depicted physiognomies, dress, postures, and accessories. He also emphasizes layers of accumulated snow, placing the viewpoint within and slightly above a maze of natural tunnels. The shades of gray and white and the highly visible, even palpable drops of white paint suggest the melting ice and contrasts with the warm brown and ochre palette of the figures. All this is Biard's effort to translate his experience into a unique form of painting. And yet, from close up, the painting seems to have little coherence due to this accumulation of traces, brushstrokes, and textures. But when we turn around and go to the next room, the painting reappears from afar, different, totally convincing and striking. We then understand the painter's effectiveness at the Salon.

A similar type of experience, and a similar scientific and naturalist imagination, animate his murals and panoramas, such as the 360° view of Magdalena Bay realized for the entrance hall of the Mineralogy Gallery of the Natural History Museum in Paris. In the exhibition, this field experience and painting process is evoked by an autographed letter from Biard (Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art) and examples of the hundreds of studies and drawings Biard made during his trip, including several fine studies of the indigenous Sami people (mostly in private collections or from the Fridtjof Nansen Institute in Lysaker).

Biard as Traveling Painter

Biard was indeed a great traveler, even an explorer.^[8] He began with a trip to Italy in 1825, in the company of, according to the catalogue, the German painter Johann Karl Ulrich Bähr and the French painter Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot. He then travelled extensively in Italy, Greece, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Egypt, Spain, Switzerland, Great Britain, and Belgium between 1827 and 1828. In 1839–40, he undertook the expedition to the Great North, crossing the Netherlands, Hamburg, Denmark, Sweden, Norway on the way up, then Finland, Sweden, Prussia, Saxony and the Rhine regions on the way back. Between 1858 and 1860, he went on his last great journey, which took him from Brazil to the United States and Canada. These journeys were essentially fieldwork, generating thousands of drawings, sketches, watercolors, and studies. The sales catalogues of 1865, 1875, and 1883 give an idea of the large number he must have produced, but today most are lost. Biard was interested in the customs, physiognomies, and costumes of native populations, which he later integrated into his paintings. According to Louis Boivin, his biographer, Biard wanted to make “a complete collection of all the types of the different human races.”^[9]

Biard's idea of collecting resonated with the ethnological undertakings of the time, and he was genuinely interested in the practices of the naturalists and scientists with whom he was in contact, notably during the scientific expedition to the Great North. He systematically collected objects, specimens, herbariums, and costumes. His interest in science even led him to represent an episode in the life of the botanist Carl von Linné, to use the microscope to

represent insects and flowers in an interpretation of *Gulliver* by Jonathan Swift, and to use photography during his stay in Brazil. In 1868, Biard exhibited a series of eighteen paintings in Berlin entitled *Travel Around the World*, which might resonate with the series of *Souvenirs de voyage* that he exhibited at the very end of his life at the 1880 Salon des Artistes Français in Paris.

Unfortunately, from this survey of the living world, from the concern for ethnology and natural sciences, from the reflection on human types—which of course includes Parisian, provincial, French, and European types—from his thoughts on the expulsion of indigenous populations, the destruction of landscapes, and the announced devastation of nature inspired by his immersion in the Amazonian forest, the exhibition does not show much. This room, at the heart of the exhibition, was perhaps too small, rendering the choice of what to show difficult to make. The exhibition presented a jumble of washes and watercolors from the very first trips to the Orient; sketches, figure studies, and serialized depictions of Turkish or orientalist women; paintings of Brazil; and paintings dedicated to contemporary slavery. Despite the quality of each work, this *mélange* did not bring out any specific traits and seemed, on the contrary, to level the painter's interest in a certain exoticism and bravura and thus trivialize his practice, which was surely not the intention of the curators.

The juxtaposition of the “souvenirs” of his travels and the paintings of the slave trade seemed awkward (fig. 8). While mandated by the shortage of space, this pairing suggested that the scenes of slavery were picturesque scenes like any other, which may be the view of some scholars but must be questioned. At the Salon of 1835, Biard exhibited *Traite des nègres* (Hull, Wilberforce House Museum). I give the original title from the Salon *livret*; the painting is now called *Slave Trade (Slaves on the West Coast of Africa)*. This image contrasted considerably with the conventional representations of slave trade, often treated in an orientalist or historical vein. By presenting rather frankly the actors and the process of the slave trade as it was practiced on the African coast, Biard triggered lively public debates and very strong critical statements. In 1835, Victor Schoelcher commented on the painting in the *Revue de Paris*:



Fig. 8, Installation view showing the third room. © Paris Musées, R. Chipault. [\[larger image\]](#)

This faithful account of an execrable trade is energetic and striking. On the left [in fact on the right] lies the slave captain, the negro merchant, his register under his eyes and smoking nonchalantly. He is having the merchandise checked for quality. Two sailors

are holding a black man lying at his feet; one is pressing his throat to force him to open his mouth, in order to recognize by his teeth if he is young; the other is beating on his chest to find out if the chest is good. Next to the slaver sits a black prince, who also smokes with the most imperturbable composure. He is probably the one who sells his prisoners for a few barrels of brandy or fifty of those bad rifles that are called Gisquet rifles, to the shame of the one who bears that name. Further on, children are violently torn away from their mothers; to the right, men and women who have been bought are marked with a red iron, the same as the ship's cargo; finally, in the background appear, driven with great blows of the whip, bands of negroes still bound to large beams, awaiting the examination which must condemn them to the most stupefying slavery, if they are not lucky enough to be chest-bound. Such is the painting of Mr. Biard; it is a vivid and painful scene which penetrates you with a deep pity; it is one of the most beautiful pleas which were pronounced against the trade.[10]

The man who was to initiate the decree of April 27, 1848, abolishing slavery in France, recognized in this painting an indispensable representation for the public awareness of what the trade in human beings meant. The debates provoked by this painting reached far and spread through Europe as the painting was shown in different places. Beyond the general dispute on the ability of art to express political opinion or to address current political subjects, the debates also concerned the question of slavery itself. Of course, most critics condemned slavery, and the painting raised fervent support against the slave trade, but there were also critics who pointed out the hypocrisy of the public, of art lovers who praised the painting and its good intentions while drawing their fortune from this trade or enjoying the lifestyle it assured. Finally, for some authors, the painting triggered a denunciation of the more generalized state of submission in modern European society, with the subservience of women to men, workers to industrial bosses, intellectuals to financiers, and so forth.[11] The painting was finally exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in 1840, where it was purchased by the abolitionist Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton.

At the same time, it must be recalled, as the authors in the catalogue do, that Biard was far from free of racist observations about the “savages” or “barbarians” he encountered during his travels, as well as the slaves and people of African descent he observed in Brazil.[12] However, the fact that he devoted a significant number of paintings to the slave trade from 1835 on and presented it in diverse ways, always critical, if not from consistent with current views, should be addressed more fully and subtly, and not simply in the black-and-white terms of acceptance or condemnation. This should include a discussion of how Biard's work engages with and disavows other representations of the subject. In the *Sale of Slaves in the States of South America* (1861, Carnegie Museum of Art), Biard uses both a rather conventional composition to highlight the victims in relation to the executioners, and a range of anecdotes that place this transaction in a chain of complex actions. Biard disturbs the public now and then by showing the slave trade as part of everyone's daily life. Such pictures rendered the viewer not just a witness, but also an accomplice.

If the Paris exhibition could not bring together many of Biard's paintings of the slave trade—neither the *Traite des nègres* of 1835, nor the *Proclamation of Freedom of Black in the Colonies* could be shown, except in the form of an endless repeating video—the presence of the Carnegie painting and a portrait study of a black man called *Portrait of a Freed Slave* (1848, Galerie Thierry Mercier; fig. 9) was stimulating. The portrait is far from being a caricature or

stereotyped figure, and the Carnegie painting opens up a different way of representing the subject. The curators were also able to gather engravings which could give an idea not only of the importance of the subject for Biard but also of the diverse approaches and visual presence he conferred on this contemporary reality. Most of these paintings on the slave trade were reproduced, notably in *L'Illustration* from the 1840s to the 1860s. The *Revue de Paris* with Schoelcher's text was presented in a vitrine, highlighting the reaction to Biard's work. It would be interesting to investigate further the link between both men, as Biard would eventually give an important place to Schoelcher in his *Proclamation*.



Fig. 9, Installation view showing the third room © Paris Musées, R. Chipault. [\[larger image\]](#)

Regarding this painting, some historians currently insist on the fact that Biard's point of view is white and dominant and that he did not sufficiently show the active role played by the slaves themselves in the process of their liberation.^[13] Some also suggest that he chose the subjects out of opportunism, a lust for exoticism, and a desire to get himself noticed.^[14] But the prominence of the subject in the totality of Biard's production suggests that he depicted the slave trade at least in part in order to stir up opposition to the dehumanizing practice; by putting these paintings in front of the European public, he did more than create a brief empathy or an entertaining thrill: he promoted a new kind of awareness, and to a very broad audience. Moreover, he celebrated the abolition of the slave trade on his own initiative, without any commission from the State, and thus inserted this event on his own into the visual national narrative, so to speak. His painting is a rather singular statement not only in the context of French art of the time, but within the history of nineteenth-century visual culture generally. It is in seeing these paintings as a series that the complexity of his approach unfolds. Whatever the skin color of his models, Biard scrutinizes their gestures, physiognomy, and attire to make his paintings striking, eloquent, or ambivalent, depending on the registers adopted. He delivered to his public images which, sometimes in the guise of comedy or caricature, sometimes behind an apparent neutrality, sometimes in a brutal way, gripped for a moment the grinding gears of society.

Amandine Piel raises, in her essay for the catalogue, an additional question that deserves to be explored in more ways than one (112). Concerning the small study entitled *Escape of Slaves* (1859, private collection), she suggests that Biard made this panel from observations in Brazil and that he carried it in his luggage during his stay in the United States. He would have had the opportunity to show it in New York during his visit in 1860, inspiring the artist Theodor Kaufmann to paint his *On to Liberty* of 1867 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

The German-born Kaufmann was trained in the academies of Düsseldorf and Munich, participated in the May Revolution of 1848 in Dresden, and then emigrated to the United States in the aftermath of the revolution. He could indeed have met Biard or come across his works in New York, and possibly even crossed path with him before in Europe. Concerning the genesis of *On to Liberty*, there is so far no evidence to link it to the study attributed to Biard, but the question deserves to be explored further. More generally, Biard's view of American genre painting, often practiced by artists trained or influenced by the Düsseldorf School, deserves to be examined. His *Sale of Slaves in the South American States* echoes works by American artists such as Richard Caton Woodville (e.g., *War News from Mexico*, 1848, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville) in its treatment of the figures and composition.

Frenchness in Dialogue

In that sense, Biard's singularity and artistic limitations, as postulated by the critics of the time, deserve to be questioned. The exhibition confronts us with the limits of nineteenth-century judgments. Critics often compared the painter to comic authors of his time, in particular to the trivial Paul de Kock, with whom, according to Théophile Gautier, he shared admirers living "in the same *faubourgs*" and a taste for "the national guards of the suburbs, the itinerant comedians, the bourgeois women in their Sunday best, and the bourgeois man who wears a bowler hat as Saint Denis wore his head" (24). If for Théophile Gautier all this was detestable, even the more favorable critics tended to inscribe Biard in a French comic tradition that made him the "Molière of painting."^[15] No doubt his painting often relied on comedies of character and situation. He delivered charged portraits that traded in stock facial types and gestures, clothes and manners, perfectly decipherable by the public of the Salon, who laughed out loud, as shown in the caricatures of the newspapers of the time. These caricatures by Cham, Bertall, Travies de Villers, in the *Journal pour rire* or *Charivari*, definitively anchored the perception of Biard in the register of a public entertainer, heavy and easy, a "profaner of painting," according to Théophile Gautier and Arsène Houssaye, for having soaked painting in caricature.

The last room of the MVH exhibition juxtaposed Biard's genre paintings head-on with these translations into caricature. Hung closely together, his paintings resisted quite well their reduction to mere caricatures (figs. 10, 11). If it was already obvious that Biard was not reducible to a genre, a field, or a universe—he was capable of exhibiting dramatic shipwrecks, burlesques, extreme landscapes, and protests against slavery at the same Salon. The room devoted to his genre paintings showed that even here, levels clash, styles differ, and registers multiply. Comical paintings stand next to shipwrecks, disease, and naval battles,^[16] light paintings of manners next to profound social pleas. For Vincent Gille, Biard's humor is anchored in a very short historical period (16). For Auguste Barbier, he was a "satirist of the middle class," a painter depicting an audience whose social structures and origins would profoundly change between the July Monarchy and the Second Empire, making the painter appear outdated long before his death (16). However, one could also say that traces of his humor remain in the most improbable works of a Jean-Léon Gérôme or an Ernest Meissonnier.



Fig. 10, Installation view showing the fourth room. On the right: *Hospital of the Fools. A Young Girl Does Not Recognize Her Parents*, 1833. Oil on canvas. Galerie de Bayser, Paris. © Paris Musées, R. Chipault. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 11, Installation view showing the fourth room. © Paris Musées, R. Chipault. [\[larger image\]](#)

This abundance and diversity, which are as evident in the last room of the exhibition as they must have been at the Salon, is disconcerting and reinforces the impression that Biard should not be considered in isolation, but rather in close dialogue with the entire artistic scene of his time. It is often noted that Biard traveled like an ethnologist to record other cultures, but no one seems to have noticed that he also looked for inspiration in the work of his fellow artists, wherever he found them in his travels. His own paintings have traveled and met with immense success, inspiring similar subjects and humor in the four corners of Europe and the Americas. But the reverse is certainly also true. Vincent Gille wonders why nobody ever tried to link Biard to Carl Spitzweg, with whom he shared an affirmed taste for derision. The exhibition contains a fine example of a painting that may have been nourished by a dialogue with Spitzweg. *The Towing* (n.d., private collection; fig. 12) shows a very odd scene of a bourgeois couple wandering and reading while submerged in the water of the Seine. They hide from the sun under a red umbrella, and have hung their clothes on the hauling rope. The comicality of the situation and the almost poetic effect of the absurd shift are quite near to Spitzweg's inventions, as well as the motif of the red umbrella lit from behind. On the other hand, Biard's curious *Compartment Reserved for the Tranquility of Ladies Traveling Alone* (ca. 1877, private collection, fig. 13) is somewhat reminiscent of British paintings such as Augustus Leopold Egg's *The Travelling Companions* (1862, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham), to which Biard contrasts a less sentimental vision of

decidedly less proper women. His Frenchness, so much commented on and vilified by critics, must now be questioned and considered in relation to shared transnational trends and concerns.



Fig. 12, François-Auguste Biard, *The Towing*, n.d. Oil on canvas. Private collection. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 13, François-Auguste Biard, *Compartment Reserved for the Tranquility of Ladies Traveling Alone*, ca. 1877. Oil on canvas. Private collection. [\[larger image\]](#)

As a matter of fact, Biard met with the support of the public not only in Paris but internationally. His works were exhibited abroad. For instance, more than thirty of his most successful paintings were shown in several German cities between the 1830s and 1870s, and many of them entered important collections there.^[17] His painting of Linné, for example, was purchased in Berlin in 1848 by Joachim Heinrich Wagener, whose collection formed the basis of the Prussian National Gallery. In the same year and city, the French painter Prosper Louis Roux also exhibited a painting of Linné that was purchased by a prominent collector. Biard was therefore not alone in his experiments, but he was exceptionally active and successful in taking advantage of his international connections, as is demonstrated by his correspondence with his dealer in Berlin and with Wagener, whom he tried to use as a connection to the Swedish court.^[18] Biard had an even closer relationship with Adolf Heinrich Schletter, a collector in Leipzig, whom he asked to be the godfather of his daughter born just after the expedition to Spitzbergen.^[19] Biard's myriad connections to the international art world could of course not be thoroughly addressed by the Paris exhibition, but his numerous transnational exchanges with artists, scholars, merchants, and collectors demands further exploration.

The exhibition allowed viewers to see most of these works in the flesh for the first time, not simply as reproductions, a status to which they were quickly reduced by the numerous translations into engravings of different formats and techniques, in French periodicals (*L'Artiste*, *Musées des familles*, *L'Illustration*, *Magasin pittoresque*), in foreign and especially British and US magazines, and in fine prints published by the likes of Aubert and Goupil. Thanks to this exhibition and its recovery of so many unknown works, it will be possible to reevaluate Biard and place him in a more complex relationship to his time.^[20] Jules Antoine Castagnary mockingly wrote, “the name Biard does not recall the name of a master, [and] his work does not raise any aesthetics questions. M. Biard stands alone in contemporary painting, without forebears, and probably without posterity” (13). In fact, however, his paintings are full of quotations, references (the most obvious ones were noted as early as *The Boat Attacked by Polar Bears* [1839], which parodies Delacroix’s *Dante and Virgil* [1822] and draws on scientific engravings), and dialogues with his contemporaries.

In the odd painting *The Disputed Resemblance* (1834, private collection; fig. 14), which differs considerably from the engraving made after the painting shown at the Salon, Biard depicts a wife suing an artist because she is dissatisfied with her husband’s portrait. The catalogue cites an art critic who reacted ambivalently to both the subject and the manner in which it is painted. But the painting is, in fact, deeply bizarre in its colors and figures, its anatomical awkwardness and characters, who seem closer to certain socialist realist painters than to early realists. The attribution to Biard is far from certain. But whether it is indeed by his hand or whether it is inspired by an early invention of Biard on this subject, it condenses in a singular way this play on registers and degrees of vision that Biard deploys elsewhere in his work—the clever *mise en abyme* of the image, its relationship to reality, the wild gesticulations urging the viewer to witness the trial, and the process of transformation of life to image.



Fig. 14, Attributed to François-Auguste Biard, *Disputed Resemblance*, 1834. Oil on canvas. Private collection. © Chloé Bernard. [\[larger image\]](#)

One can criticize Biard for not having found his voice and for his obvious inconsistency. But it is equally obvious that he contributed immensely to shaping contemporary visual culture, not only by creating images for entertainment but by constantly questioning the registers or categories of visibility.

Certainly, in light of discussions on nineteenth-century visual culture and the political stakes involved in his work, it will be necessary to deconstruct not only the critical cocoon that has enveloped his work but also to rethink Biard's subjects in their long-term seriality. Pedro Alvim, who dedicated his doctoral research to Biard in 2003,^[21] provides a useful anecdote in his contribution to the catalogue with his essay "Le voyage au Brésil." He quotes a conversation that Biard is said to have had at the end of his life with a Brazilian student. The young man had come to challenge Biard to a duel because he had been offended by *Two Years in Brazil*, published by Biard in 1862. The book contained exaggerations, provoking the ire of Brazilian commentators who saw in it an obvious desire to ridicule Brazilian society. The young man gave up when he discovered an affable old man who welcomed him with open arms and proposed to fight in the forest using poison arrows. But after the jokes, Biard confessed:

It's true. I hurt Brazil a lot. I sincerely regret it. I was welcomed in your country with tenderness and enthusiasm. Your emperor took me in. The Brazilians were towards me as they are always towards foreigners: polite and friendly. But what do you want? I wanted to amuse the French and my pencil and pen gave what you know. I have an excuse: I just told the truth. Yes, sir, almost the whole story is true.^[22]

This dialogue is almost too good to be true because it says so much about the artist's desire to seize the public's attention while also meditating on the ways in which life experience is transferred into visual, pictorial, and narrative languages. Biard's light-heartedness is not so light-hearted, and his humor sometimes is full of despair about humanity. The MVH exhibition offered the first essential step in reconsidering the way in which Biard illuminates the agile visual culture of his time.

France Nerlich

Art History Professor at Université de Tours

Director of Research and Studies at Institut national d'histoire de l'art in Paris

france.nerlich[at]inha.fr

Notes

Translations provided by the author of this review.

[1] The exhibition had a second stage at the Nordnorsk Museum in Tromsø (Norway), under the title *The Life of Others*. Sanitary conditions did not allow the author to visit this second version of the exhibition, which focused on Biard's account of other cultures and other spaces in a more critical way than the Paris exhibition and by confronting Biard's work with works of his time and of today.

[2] *Lettres de Victor Hugo à Léonie Biard*, ed. Jean Gaudon (Paris: Claude Blaziot, 1990); Françoise Lapeyre, *Léonie d'Aunet: "lorsque je vous vois, je songe aux étoiles"* (Paris: J. C. Lattès, 2004).

[3] *La Collection Brasiliana. Les peintres voyageurs romantiques au Brésil (1820–1840)*, exh. cat., Musée de la Vie Romantique (Paris: Paris Musées, 2005); Anne Aaserud and Knut Ljøgdødt, *Voyage pittoresque reisekildringer fra nord*, exh. cat. (Tromsø: Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum, 2005); Pierre-Lin Renié, ed., *Le Musée des rieurs. Eugène Guérard, François-Auguste Biard et la scène de mœurs au XIXe siècle*, exh. cat. (Bordeaux: Musée Goupil, 2006); *Peintures des lointains. La collection du musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac*, exh. cat. (Paris: Skira, 2018); *Le Modèle noir. De*

Géricault à Matisse, exh. cat., Musée d'Orsay (Paris: Flammarion, 2019); Eric de Chasse, ed., *Sauvages nudités. Peindre le Grand Nord. Balke, Biard, Bergman / Savage Bareness. Painting the Great North. Balke, Biard, Bergman*, exh. cat., (Paris: INHA, 2019).

[4] Baptiste Henriot published in 2020 two books dedicated to Biard, one monographic to trace the painter's travels, the other a small fictional interview with the painter: *François-Auguste Biard. Froide couche pour un si long sommeil* (Paris: TheBookEdition, 2020); *François-Auguste Biard. Souvenirs d'un peintre voyageur* (Paris: TheBookEdition, 2020). The catalogue raisonné is presented on the author's website with restricted access <https://www.baptistehenriot.com/>.

[5] Eugène Delacroix, *Journal 1822–1863* (Paris: Plon, 1996), 529.

[6] On that travel and its outcomes, Aaserud/Ljøgodt, *Voyage pittoresque*, 2005, and more recently: Adèle Akamatsu and France Nerlich, "'Painting almost under the North Pole!' François-Auguste Biard and the invention of the landscape of the Great North," in *Sauvages nudités/Savage bareness*, 52–77.

[7] Léonie d'Aunet, *Voyage d'une femme au Spitzberg* (Paris: Hachette, 1854). The text has been republished several times. The latest edition is: Léonie d'Aunet, *Voyage d'une femme au Spitzberg*, ed. Marc de Gouvenain (Arles: Actes Sud, 1995).

[8] One of the first scholars to have dedicated work to Biard is Barbara C. Matilsky. See for example her text "François-Auguste Biard: artist-naturalist-explorer," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, February 1985, 75–88.

[9] Louis Boivin, *Notice sur M. Biard; ses aventures, son voyage en Laponie avec madame Biard, examen critique de ses tableaux* (Paris: chez tous les marchands de nouveautés, 1842), 45.

[10] Victor Schoelcher, "Salon de 1835," *Revue de Paris*, March–April 1835, 52–53.

[11] See for example: Johanna von Haza, Premières impressions d'un profane à l'exposition d'art de Leipzig de l'automne 1837, in *Plumes et Pinceaux. Discours de femmes sur l'art en Europe (1750–1850) – Anthologie*, ed. Anne Lafont (Dijon: Presses du réel, 2012), 405–07.

[12] On these images, see especially Ana Lúcia Araújo, "Les représentations de l'esclavage dans les gravures des relations *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil* de Jean-Baptiste Debret et *Deux années au Brésil* de François-Auguste Biard," *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean studies* 30, issue 59 (2005), 161–83; Ana Lúcia Araújo, "Culture visuelle et mémoire de l'esclavage: regards français sur les populations d'origine africaine dans le Brésil du XIXe siècle," *Brésil(s): sciences humaines et sociales*, 10, November 30, 2016, accessed July 30, 2021, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.inha.fr:2443/10.4000/bresils.1972> [login required].

[13] See for example the reactions to the exhibition *Modèle noir*. Pap Ndiaye, quoted by Hassina Mechaï in *Le Point*, July 15, 2019; Pascal Blanchard and Lilian Thuram, "Corps noir, regard blanc," *ACHAC*, <https://www.achac.com/>.

[14] Araújo, "Culture visuelle et mémoire de l'esclavage."

[15] Boivin, *Notice*, 71.

[16] Stéphane Loire, "François-Auguste Biard aux Salons. Trois tableaux d'inspiration maritime," in *Du texte à l'image: l'interprétation savante des œuvres d'art. Mélanges offerts à François Fossier*, ed. Laurent Baridon and Pierre Vaisse (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2018), 57–64.

[17] France Nerlich, *La peinture française en Allemagne, 1815–1870* (Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2010). In 2015, the Museum of Fine Arts in Leipzig organized an exhibition comparing Delacroix and Delaroche. Oddly hidden at the end of the catalogue is an appendix on the collection of Adolf Heinrich Schletter, a great collector of French art, who was a patron and friend of François-Auguste Biard. Jan Nicolaisen has also devoted an article to two of Biard's most important paintings in Schletter's collection. Jan Nicolaisen, ed., *Eugène Delacroix & Paul Delaroche. Geschichte als Sensation*, exh. cat., Museum der Bildenden Künste (Leipzig: Imhof, 2015); Jan Nicolaisen, "Ein vergessener Maler der grossen Emotionen. François-Auguste Biard (1798–1882); zu zwei Gemälden aus der Sammlung von Adolph Heinrich Schletter," *MdbK*, 15 (2014), 44–56.

[18] France Nerlich, "Französische Bilder. Die Sammlung Wagener im Vergleich," in *Die Gründung der Nationalgalerie in Berlin. Der Stifter Wagener und seine Bilder*, ed. Birgit Verwiebe and Angelika Wesenberg (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2013), 99–120.

[19] Unpublished letter from François-Auguste Biard to Adolf Heinrich Schletter, Paris, October 10, 1840, Sammlung Liebeskind, I/5, Universitätsbibliothek Leipzig.

[20] The show's remarkable merit was to exhume all these works, forgotten or held in private collections, and to bring out Biard as an elusive polygraph. The catalogue only imperfectly reflects this abundance and the new ideas that the exhibition could provide to previous

scholarly and curatorial work. The absence of a proper state of the art, complete bibliography, and useful references limit the usefulness of the catalogue; the essays bear interesting thoughts after getting past the confusing typography and chaotic display of images.

[21] Pedro Alvim, “Le Monde comme spectacle: l’œuvre du peintre François-Auguste Biard (1798–1882),” (PhD diss., Université Paris Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2003).

[22] *Jornal do Comércio*, July 9, 1882, quoted in Ana Lúcia Araújo, *Romantisme tropical. L’aventure d’un peintre français au Brésil* (Quebec: PUL, 2008), 2.

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Installation view showing the entrance to the exhibition *François-Auguste Biard Peintre Voyageur*, Maison de Victor Hugo, Paris, 2021 © Paris Musées, R. Chipault. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Installation view showing the first room with a series of portraits, at the exhibition *François-Auguste Biard Peintre Voyageur*, Paris, 2021 © Paris Musées, R. Chipault. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, François-Auguste Biard, *My Studio*, 1866. Oil on canvas. Collection M. R. © collection particulière / Photo D. R. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Benjamin Roubaud, “Si Biard est peint en ours, c’est pour la belle page” (If Biard painted as a bear, it is for a beautiful page) in *Panthéon charivarique* in *Le Charivari*, September 11, 1840, ninth year, no. 256. Lithograph. Artwork in the public domain; courtesy of the Paris Museums and Museum Carnavalet per the licensing agreement, www.parismuseescollections.paris.fr/. [return to text]



Fig. 5, Installation view showing the second exhibition room of *François-Auguste Biard Peintre Voyageur*. From left to right: *Le Baiser dans les glaces* (Kiss on the ice), 1868. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Art et d'Histoire Baron Gérard, Bayeux. *Magdalena Bay, vue prise de la presqu'île des Tombeaux, au nord du Spitzberg; effet d'aurore boréale* (Magdalena Bay, view taken from the Peninsula of the Graves, North of Spitzbergen; Aurora Borealis effect), 1841. Oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris. *Bay of Magdalen, Spitzbergen, by 79° 35 m. lat. North*, 1844. Oil on canvas. Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris. © Paris Musées, R. Chipault. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, Installation view showing the second exhibition room. On the left: *Vue de l'océan Glacial: pêche aux morses par des Groenlandais* (View of the Glacial Ocean: Greenlanders hunting walrus), 1841. Oil on canvas. Château-musée, Dippe. The others see Fig. 5. © Paris Musées, R. Chipault. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 7, Installation view with François-Auguste Biard, *Bay of Magdalena, Spitsbergen, by 79° 35 m. lat. North*, 1841. Oil on canvas. © Paris Musées, R. Chipault. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, Installation view showing the third room. © Paris Musées, R. Chipault. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 9, Installation view showing the third room © Paris Musées, R. Chipault. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 10, Installation view showing the fourth room. On the right: *Hospital of the Fools. A Young Girl Does Not Recognize Her Parents*, 1833. Oil on canvas. Galerie de Bayser, Paris. © Paris Musées, R. Chipault.

[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 11, Installation view showing the fourth room. © Paris Musées, R. Chipault. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 12, François-Auguste Biard, *The Towing*, n.d. Oil on canvas. Private collection. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 13, François-Auguste Biard, *Compartment Reserved for the Tranquility of Ladies Traveling Alone*, ca. 1877. Oil on canvas. Private collection. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 14, Attributed to François-Auguste Biard, *Disputed Resemblance*, 1834. Oil on canvas. Private collection. © Chloé Bernard. [\[return to text\]](#)