Conference Examines French Women Intellectuals of the Nineteenth Century

Indiana University Bloomington’s Department of French and Italian hosted the international conference, Women Seeking Expression/ La femme à la recherche de l’expression: France 1789–1914, from September 23 to 26, 1999. More than 90 faculty, staff, and students attended the multidisciplinary, bilingual conference featuring scholars from Australia, Canada, England, France, Germany, Ireland, and throughout the United States. This was the first conference of its kind devoted solely to the study of the rich creative expressiveness by women writers, artists, and composers throughout the “long” nineteenth century. The conference included almost 60 presentations in plenary and simultaneous sessions, two concerts, and a special exhibition at the Lilly Library.

After welcoming remarks by Dean for International Programs Patrick O’Meara, the first plenary session, “Women and Art,” was opened by IU’s Rosemary Lloyd (French and Italian). Mary Ann Caws (CCNY) evoked the life and work of Suzanne Valadon, an innovative and dynamic painter of the first decades of the 1900s who has been too often dismissed simply as “Utrillo’s mother.” The paper by Gabriel Weisberg (University of Minnesota), a curator of many exhibitions, offered a sharp contrast to the increasing sadness of Valadon’s life. He spoke of eager and confident young women at the Académie Julian, the only art school open to women in Paris in the late nineteenth century. An exhibit curated by Weisberg of works, photographs, and cartoons from the academy is to be shown at three venues in the United States.

The relationship between literature and music, specifically the ways in which George Sand succeeded in discussing music and its function within her long novel, Consuelo, was the subject of the paper by Peter Dayan (University of Edinburgh), known for his provocative and influential studies of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Sand. Laurence Porter (Michigan State University), author of a wide range of studies linking comparative literature studies and psychoanalysis, drew on his book in progress to present a new framework for approaching questions of gender and literature.

Janet L. Beizer (University of Virginia), most recently recognized for her explorations of hysteria and the gendered nature of medical discourse, presented a lecture on George Sand’s autobiography, Histoire de ma vie. Approaching Sand through a recent French biography of her life, Beizer argued that the writing of biography is often a surreptitious writing of autobiography. Marilyn Yalom of Stanford University’s Center for Research on Women and Gender, and an expert on women’s writing and women’s history, lectured on the travel memoirs of Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, whose depictions of life in European capitals and imperial Russia provided a fascinating record of the times.

The closing plenary session, “Breaking Bonds,” featured two very different nineteenth-century women.

Cover of La Plume, courtesy of the Lilly Library, was used as the conference logo.

Peter Cryle (University of Queensland), author of the recent monograph, Geometry in the Boudoir, revealed the rhetorical strategies of pornography in the writings of Félicité de Choiseul-Meuse and her subtle analysis of female desire. Michael Pakenham (Exeter University), whose research interests are in the symbolist period, explained the life and influence of the fascinating and enigmatic salon hostess, Nina de Callias.

The plenary papers described above touched on women’s creativity in art, music, literature, and erotic writing, and on ways in which that creativity could be explored and highlighted. The simultaneous sessions ranged even more widely, discussing the contributions by nineteenth century women to science

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peace and understanding between people," uses ambiguous imagery. The flags of six nations, in the form of a seamless cord, are wound into a knot around a pencil. In one interpretation, they could represent the close bond of friendship between these nations. But the knot could also be viewed as a "Gordian knot," symbolizing that it is tension and conflict that keep these nations together, not peace. Elsewhere, a theatre poster, depicting a lonely old woman beside a crumbling wall, is a veiled criticism of the state's inability to care for its poor and aged.

The juxtaposition of the two exhibits at the Fine Arts Gallery was planned by Bucur and Wasserstrom, once they realized their overlapping interests. As part of the Polish and Romanian exhibit, they organized a roundtable discussion that also included Lazslo Borhi (Hungarian Studies), Christina Illias (Slavics, Classics), and Bozena Shallcross (Polish Studies, Slavics). The group examined the relationship of the two exhibits to each other, the impact of the posters on their viewers, and posters as an artistic genre in these different countries. To keep the dialogue generated by these two exhibits going, the Center for the Study of Global Change has established a faculty study group to compare socialist and post-socialist cultures.

Major support for the Chinese exhibit came from The Henry Luce Foundation, IU's East Asian Studies Center, and SoFA, with additional support from other IU units and programs. A complete description of the exhibit may be found by following the links under the EASC Web site: http://www.indiana.edu/~easc. The Polish and Romanian exhibit was supported by IU's Russian and East European Institute, the Polish Studies Center, and SoFA. A complete description of the exhibit may be found at the SoFA Web site: http://www.fa.indiana.edu/~sofa/Iron/index.html.

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and sculpture, novels and poetry, history and theatre, travel and memoirs, autobiography, and cabaret dancing.

The conference featured several special events, notably an exhibit of women's writing at the Lilly Library of rare books and manuscripts, and two concerts of music composed by or written about women. The Lilly exhibit, Women Seeking Expression, 1789–1914, was open from September 20 through December 18, 1999. Despite the inhospitality of the nineteenth century towards publications by women, due in great part to the Napoleonic code and the anti-feminist backlash occurring around 1880 when education was made free, compulsory, and secular, the women writers, artists, and composers of that period were enormously productive. The Lilly exhibit showed the great variety achieved, including pedagogical books, historical analyses, journals and travelogues, novels, poetry, plays, polemical treatises, and studies of natural sciences. A few highlights include the 1903 doctoral thesis of two-time Nobel Prize winner Marie Curie, a manuscript by art critic Judith Cladel and a photo of her and Rodin, and a recently discovered and unpublished letter dated in 1857 by George Sand.

IU's School of Music offered participants a concert of music composed by sisters Nadia Boulanger (1887–1979) and Lili Boulanger (1893–1918). Emile Naoumoff of IU's School of Music organized the concert. The pieces performed included one that Lili dictated on her deathbed to her sister Nadia, one that Nadia composed for Lili's funeral, and a composition written by Lili at the Villa Medici in Rome in 1913, the year she won the Grand Prix de Rome for composition.

A second concert, titled Portrait de Femmes, was performed in the Hoagy Carmichael Room. It featured mezzo-soprano Margo McLean and pianist Gaît Sirguey, offering a musical representation of French women in history, myth, and daily life as depicted by writers and composers of both sexes. The first part, "La vie d'une femme," portrayed women's experiences from birth through childhood, sexual awakening, marriage, abandonment, nostalgia, and death. The second part, "Les grandes héroïnes," reacquainted the audience with goddesses, saints, literary figures, and the Romantic muse.

The conference ended with an optimistic sense of mission: as more researchers reach a deeper understanding of women's artistic contributions in the nineteenth century, the more possible it will be to effect a radical transformation in what has

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been traditionally taught in universities as "nineteenth-century literature and culture." Two books are expected to result from the conference, the first to be a collection of essays associated with the topic of "Women Seeking Expression," and the second a broadly representative anthology of women's writings in translation.

Sponsors of the conference were the Department of French and Italian, Archives of Traditional Music, Barr Koon Fund, West European Studies, Burke Lecture Fund, Office of the Chancellor, Office of Women's Affairs, College of Arts and Sciences, Office of International Programs, Research and the Graduate School, Dean of Faculties Multidisciplinary Ventures Fund, Lilly Library, and the School of Music.

—Heather McCullough  
Department of French and Italian

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