

Jean-Philippe DELHOMME

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Since January, French illustrator Jean-Philippe Delhomme, the Musée d'Orsay's first Instagram artist-in-residence, has posted one new drawing each week to the museum's account. Delhomme — whose illustration work has appeared in *Vanity Fair*, *M Le Monde*, *Zeit Magazin*, and the *New Yorker*—published the book *Artists' Instagrams* (August Editions) last year. The drawings in it imagine how twentieth-century artists like Piet Mondrian and Fernand Léger would have behaved on social media, talking themselves up or weighing in on hot button topics.

The residency extends the premise of his book, in turn playing with the public image of a traditional museum. His drawings for the Musée d'Orsay's account highlight how self-promotion and amiable banter function as constants in creative life. (In one post, French Post-Impressionist Paul Sérusier comments "Sick!" on a pic from Odilon Redon's feed). While Delhomme's work lightly lampoons artistic self-promotion, his current residency project also reflects on how creators and viewers alike engage in relentless documentation. Visitors to museums like Musée d'Orsay lean into the cultural cachet of their outing by posting and sharing photos of it. On social media, viewers frame what they see for collective consumption, just as artists frame what they make.

Delhomme continues to work steadily in Paris while sheltering in place and posts both to his own account and the museum's. I spoke to him about the pitfalls of social media and the perks of demystifying iconic figures. "Los Angeles Language," an exhibition of his paintings, was scheduled to open at Galerie Perrotin in Paris last month; he hopes the gallery will be able to welcome visitors later this spring.

You're the first resident for the Musée d'Orsay's Instagram account. How did this come about?

Donatien Grau, who heads up artist collaborations at the Musée d'Orsay, saw my book *Artists' Instagrams* and thought it would be great to continue the project with nineteenth-century artists for the museum. There's no brief. I have total freedom. If there is a temporary exhibition at the museum, I focus on it—I've done posts responding to shows about J.K. Huysmans and Degas. I try to make it interesting both for people who know art history and for those who are more knowledgeable about Instagram culture.

Is part of the appeal of the project to make French art history feel less conservative, less rigid?

When I started, some people asked me if the purpose was to “dust off” the museum. And I said no: it doesn't need to be dusted off! To me, nineteenth-century art doesn't need to be updated. It's just as alive as contemporary art.



Jean-Philippe Delhomme's drawing of an imagined Instagram post by Odilon Redon. © Jean-Philippe Delhomme.

The Musée d'Orsay has had some interesting recent exhibitions that shifted our understanding of the canon, like “Black Models: from Géricault to Matisse” in 2019. Has your project attempted to rethink art history in terms of gender and race?

This exhibition on the black model completely changed my way of looking at Manet's *Olympia*. Manet's small notebook was displayed next to *Olympia* in a vitrine. Manet had written the model's name, Laure, and her address in the ninth arrondissement. It made the whole thing very tangible—a painter meets somebody, and thinks it would be great to do a painting with her. She's not just a subject, but a person.

I did a post about William-Adolphe Bouguereau's painting *Les Oreads* [1902]. This art was considered bad taste in its time. It's a shock for the contemporary eye: you see a flock of nude women and three fauns leering at them. The caption and the comments included in my drawing contrast contemporary awareness of the "male gaze" with Bougeureau's attitudes. I didn't want to say what's right or wrong, but give people something to consider.

You've worked with both print and digital platforms over the course of your career. How did things evolve for you?

I studied painting in the '80s in France, when nobody was interested in it. Only video and installation art were considered relevant. Creating illustration work for magazines seemed like the best way to gain visibility, more so than showing a painting in a gallery.

In the '90s, magazines were the most powerful media. Then came websites. I did a blog called *The Unknown Hipster*, an illustrated social diary satirizing the art and fashion scenes,. When the blog form was washed away by social media, I started using Instagram. Nonetheless, I've always felt some kind of alienation from the media of the time—somehow, you need to fight back against the dominance of a platform by asserting your own perspective.

As an artist you create in a vacuum, but on a social media platform you're courting people's reactions. How do you address this fundamental difference?

I started drawing imaginary posts by Picasso and others to rebel against Instagram with humor. I think social media is alienating to artists because it's a space for promotion—even this word, "promotion," is stupid for an artist. You're submitting your work for random people's approval, and that's the worst thing for an artist! You should make work for yourself, not for the public's evaluation. If you get addicted to that, you become a brand, and satisfying your customers is all that matters.

All these nineteenth-century artists, the original ones anyway, suffered because they submitted their work to the Salons. The judges would refuse work that was ahead of its time. Most artists need to work in isolation. I know there are some who work with two hundred assistants, but most of the time you need to be alone and concentrate. Instagram challenges this. You can be tempted to get a reaction, and change your work based on the response from your followers. Social media has the effect of flattening everything. It's exciting at first, but you have to be careful not to let it dilute your work.

But even before social media, people postured within the art world. We blame something like Instagram—credibly—but the art milieu is often about getting reactions by any means.



Frédéric Bazille: *L'Atelier de Bazille* (*Bazille's Studio*), 1870, oil on canvas, 38 1/2 by 50 1/2 inches. © Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Patrice Schmidt.

I agree. When you read books on art history, even in the nineteenth century, people were no less eager to be known and famous than today—it's just much more efficient with Instagram. There is a painting by Frédéric Bazille called *L'Atelier de Bazille* [1870]. You see him in his studio with different artists: Manet, Renoir. These were his “followers.” You'd have ten followers instead of thirty thousand, but they'd come and look at the work.

Except you had to make that effort to be seen.

Yeah. It's more interesting to have people coming to your place, or meeting at the café to talk about art. Having a community is richer than sending out pictures and getting likes from people you don't know.

Since you do a weekly post, do you plan out in advance which works to tackle?

No, no, no—I don't plan ahead of time. At the beginning of this collaboration, I took walks in the museum with Sylvie Patry, the museum's head of collections and conservation. It was wonderful. I started looking at the paintings in a much more intimate way. Obviously I can't go back there for a while, but I have my own memories and I'm reading biographies of artists, trying to deepen my knowledge of nineteenth-century art history. I'm reading Michael Fried on Manet. Thinking of the current lockdown situation, one of the posts I did was on Henri Fantin-Latour's *La Liseuse* [*The Reader*, 1861]—and of course it speaks to us today: we're in our rooms, we can't go out. It's a challenge to be absorbed by at-home activities.

What's your approach to sharing your own work on social media?

I started using Instagram to pass time by making jokes, like when you're bored at school and doodling or passing notes. But people don't really get jokes on Instagram. It's used for promotion, so adding humor destabilizes people. These days I use Instagram mostly to show my paintings. Several years ago, I started painting very silent-seeming urban landscapes. I wasn't trying to be

clever or match the “mood” of contemporary art. I was just looking at the light, and the texture of the paint. They’re about observation without any narrative or social commentary. It’s a coincidence that they have an eerie resonance with the circumstances today.