

A close-up, high-angle shot of an elderly woman with white hair, wearing a dark brown fedora and a blue dress with intricate gold embroidery. She is sitting on a cobblestone street, smoking a cigarette, and holding a sketchbook with a pencil drawing of a face. The background is a blurred view of the street.

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ROSA BONHEUR

A FEMINIST MOTHER NATURE

A 60' documentary
Directed by Gregory Monro
Produced by France 5 and O2B Films

PROVISIONAL DELIVERY: FEBRUARY 2022

Producer's note

For many Parisians, Rosa Bonheur is a guinguette nestled in the heart of the Buttes-Chaumont park, in the 19th arrondissement of Paris. A place that opened an extension on a barge, on the banks of the Seine, a few years ago. But few know the eponymous artist it pays tribute to. And for good reason, Rosa Bonheur, renowned animal painter in the 19th century, and major figure of female emancipation and of the animal cause, has been a little forgotten in her own country.

There are several reasons for this lack of recognition: a woman artist in a history of art written by men, Rosa Bonheur also suffered from how animal art fell out of fashion in the 20th century. But her work was probably glossed over for an even deeper reason: for more than a century, in France, the history of art focused only on the history of the avant-gardes. A leader of the naturalist school, Rosa Bonheur was relegated to the margins of history by the impressionist revolution of which she was the contemporary. However, abroad, and in particular in the United States and the United Kingdom, Rosa Bonheur is still considered a major artist. By devoting a major exhibition to her in the fall of 2022, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of her birth, the Musée d'Orsay intends to give her her rightful place in the history of art. For the first time in a century, works from the greatest museums, notably the Metropolitan Museum of New York, will be brought together in Paris.

Our documentary will contribute to the reunion of the general public with the most famous French artist of the 19th century, but will also allow us to discover an exceptional woman. For Rosa Bonheur was a major figure of female emancipation: she was the first woman artist to receive the Legion of Honour, from the hands of another woman, the Empress Eugenie, who said on this occasion: "Genius has no sex". She was also the first woman officially authorized to wear pants; the first to buy property with the fruit of her labor, thanks to the sale of a single painting; she settled in this property with several friends: living between women, sharing their fortunes between them, becoming heirs of each other, they founded a sisterhood that would leave a lasting impression on the French society of the time. This haven of peace is the Château de By in Seine-et-Marne, located on the edge of the village of Thomery. A jewel of architecture and memory where most of our filming will take place: we will bring Rosa Bonheur back to life through reconstructions and evocations. Gregory Monro, the director, is very familiar with the exercise of bringing a century – here the 19th century, which did not yet have filmed images – back to life thanks to the use of "fiction".

He has used it in other documentary portraits that have had great public and critical success: Toulouse-Lautrec: Racing Through Life (Arte), Calamity Jane: Wild West Legend (Arte) or Michel Legrand: Let the Music Play (Arte) which represented France at the 2019 Emmy Awards. More recently, Gregory has worked with Arte to craft a documentary that is currently making the rounds: Kubrick by Kubrick. Gregory Monro will thus logically direct this film near Fontainebleau, at the Château de By. Acquired in 2017 by Katherine Brault, a history buff, the property has been preserved in its original state for more than a century and is home to Rosa Bonheur's studio. It is the best preserved artist's studio in France, the largest and the brightest.

This place's neo-gothic atmosphere is as strange as it is enchanting. All the objects of Rosa Bonheur's daily life have remained in their place: unfinished paintings, sculptures, documents, photo lab... We have everything we need for a realistic immersion in a work session with Rosa Bonheur – which will greatly benefit our shooting. But by bringing Rosa Bonheur and her work back to life, our documentary does not only want to do justice to an exceptional artist and female figure: she is also, and this is where her life and work resonate so much with our current concerns, a precursor of the animal cause and of ecological thinking. In a century of urbanization, she was the first to understand that the age-old relationship between humans and animals was falling apart.

By painting animals for the first time not in an abstract way but as individuals, by creating real portraits, Rosa Bonheur contributed to sensitize her contemporaries to the fate of animals, to their suffering and to the sometimes outrageous exploitation to which they were subjected. The creation in 1845 of the first Society for the Protection of Animals, as well as the Grammont Law of 1850, which gave animals their first rights, were part of this new sensibility that was born in the 19th century and of which Rosa Bonheur was the main representative in the world of the arts. Our documentary intends to shed a light on this extraordinary life – a revolutionary one in many ways in its century, and which heralds our modernity in such an astonishing way. In addition to filming in her studio, we will bring back the animals that the artist had collected and which lived there in freedom (deer, horses, oxen, sheep, etc.) to the magnificent park of the Château de By, which adjoins that of Fontainebleau.

Olivier de Bannes



Director's note

Rosalie, aka Rosa. An artist. A pragmatic idealist, a "conventional maverick", but above all a painter of agricultural and wild life at a time when the industrial revolution and urban growth are wiping out the age-old relationship between men and animals. A feminist as well. In a century that considers women as minors or incapable in law and in capacity, subjecting them to a father, a brother or a husband, forbidding them access to knowledge and to any form of power, Rosa Bonheur vows to "empower women". Abandoned by her father, having seen her mother kill herself, she refuses to marry and lives openly with women. This was enough to shock more than one right-thinking person at the time. On the contrary, she will be honored, respected, decorated, as if protected by a magic spell.

As we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of the most famous woman painter of the 19th century, who installed in the garden of her château in Seine-et-Marne a host of animals, including a lioness in the wild, the film proposes to rediscover an artist somewhat forgotten in her own country and yet celebrated in the United States and England as a major artist. I imagine this film to be in the image of its subject: generous, playful, contemplative, and full of character. Rosa Bonheur's 2,000 or so works are scattered all over the world, but fortunately for us there are many preserved in France, at Orsay, Fontainebleau, Bordeaux. It is therefore in co-production with the Musée d'Orsay and the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Bordeaux that we will have access to exceptional archives, but also to numerous photos, often taken in her haven of peace in By, this property in the Ile-de-France where Rosa lived surrounded by animals, and her last companion, Anna Klumpke.

It is a perfect transition to evoke this dreamy setting next to the forest, which is the main setting of our documentary. The Château de By has the singularity of having been preserved identically since the artist's death, 120 years ago. Its facade, its garden, its rooms, Rosa's studio, but also her personal belongings, her clothes are preserved there, exactly as they were at the time. A godsend for our camera, which will wander around like a visitor in a museum. Through a steadicam's lens, the spectator is invited to enter the atypical universe of an extraordinary artist. As the story unfolds, this subjective camera will wander into every corner of this sublime residence. We will make generous use of flashbacks, through which we will delve into the past, as if the items and the rooms came to life.

For example, we can imagine our camera panning into the artist's studio, who magically appears so we can see her work. The same goes for the exteriors, where Rosa Bonheur was painting surrounded by her animals, with shots of the empty garden suddenly coming to life with the artist and her faithful companions. In order for these part-documentary, part-historical-representation shots to be executed to perfection, we will use the technique known as "Motion Control", a camera remotely controlled by an electronic system capable of reproducing the same movement as many times as necessary. From then on, we will only need to add animals or silhouettes in the second shot, notably that of Rosa, to finally create the effect of an appearance in the middle of a filmed shot. Our reconstruction will be dreamlike, precise and quite simple in its execution. This technique will also be used for the appearance of certain participants filmed on location. At the Puy-du-Fou, with the means made available to us by a subsidiary of the park, we will also shoot the reconstruction of the two most famous paintings of Rosa Bonheur: Ploughing in the Nivernais and The Horse Fair. Working with animals is a first for me, and I am truly delighted to walk in the footsteps of Rosa Bonheur, to put my camera where she put her brushes.

As far as the narration is concerned, as outlined the synopsis, we will favor two principles. First of all, as mentioned in the first sequences, the story will be told in the voice of Rosa Bonheur herself, in the first person, in the form of confidences as collected in the book by Anna Klumpke, her last companion. This testimony is a godsend, because Rosa Bonheur tells about her entire life, without any taboos. Our reconstructions will bring Rosa to life at different ages.

Gregory Monro





Speakers

The artist's own voice will act as the documentary's guiding thread; it will be accompanied and made more profound by the impassioned interventions of art historians or specialists in the history of women:

Leila Jarbouai, art historian and curator of the Rosa Bonheur exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay

Sandra Buratti Hasan, art historian and curator of the 19th and 20th century collections at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Bordeaux

Patricia Bouchenot-Déchin, researcher and historian, Member of the Board of Directors of the Académie des sciences morales, des Lettres et des Arts de Versailles et d'Ile-de-France

Marie Borin, writer and biographer of Rosa Bonheur. *Rosa Bonheur, in the Name of the Mother* (2021)

Katherine Brault, owner of the Château de By and specialist of Rosa Bonheur

These testimonies, combined with Rosa Bonheur's story "as told by herself" and put in images through our reconstructions, archives and works, will allow us to better understand the considerable importance that Rosa Bonheur had in her century, and what a lesson in freedom she still gives us today.







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