

Antoine Vollon: Rendering Butter

'Beurre.—C'est une substance grasse, onctueuse, qui se forme de la crème du lait épaissie à force d'être battue' (Dumas 91).

'Le beurre ou matière grasse concrète du lait est composé de trois corps gras différents: l'*oléine*, la *stéarine* et la *butyrine*. Le beurre a une couleur qui varie du blanc jaunâtre au jaune, il fond à 36°. Il est susceptible de se *rancir* au bout d'un certain temps et d'acquérir un goût âcre qui ne permet plus de l'employer. Pour préserver le beurre de cette alteration, on a recours, soit à la fusion, soit à la salaison, et on le conserve dans des pots de grès neufs, bien nettoyés et exempts de goût ou d'odeur quelconque' (Chevallier 111).

'Le mauvais beurre ne vous donnera jamais que de mauvaises choses' (Gouffé 394).

The heap of butter at the center of Antoine Vollon's 19 ¾ x 24 inch *Mound of Butter* painted between 1875 and 1885 [Fig. 1] conjures up so much more than an image of this subject would initially seem to inspire. This veritable glacier of butter, measurable as such in relation to the two simple, solid eggs at its base, smacks of the uncanny. Indeed, what should be ordinary, familiar, pleasurable, a comforting element of daily life, is here transformed into an out-of-scale architectonic, slightly disturbing, corporeal mass. Yes, it reminds us of its referent—the butter—but it also inscribes an alternative menu of perverse associations. I want, therefore, to explore the ways in which this painting exceeds the very substance it purports to represent, the ways in which it calls into question the utter simplicity associated with butter in France during the late nineteenth century. One of the most basic ingredients of French cooking at the time—especially when combined with eggs—butter here is rendered anything but basic.

It is precisely our expectations and understanding that butter is such a common and fundamental element of so many recipes—in the second half of the nineteenth century as it is today—that leaves us somewhat confounded when we look at this small painting, because we are forced to acknowledge that something is not quite right. Vollon's whirl of creamy brushwork, itself the very epitome of butteriness, seduces the viewer, appealing to his/her sense of touch, taste, and sight. And yet, the whole mass established by the coagulation of thick, fairly greasy, pale yellow pigment veers towards being unsettling, disconcerting, even noxious.

Not only does this pyramidal form surrounded by a loosely-painted white cheese cloth disturb because of its material constitution and surprising formal associations, but also because of its sheer excess, made to appear to be excessive because the eggs next to it are so disproportionately small. Without the eggs to indicate scale, the mound of butter would be far less troubling and more plausible as such. In

fact, producing a quantity of butter this great would have required such a substantial amount of cream (and therefore an even greater measure of milk) that the image seems a bit hard to fathom.¹ To cite a statistic from Camille Husson writing in 1878 about the production and chemical constitution of butter: 'Un kilogramme de beurre représente la presque totalité des corps gras contenus dans 28 litres de lait' (176).



Fig. 1 Antoine Vollon (1833-1900). *Mound of Butter*, 1875-85. Oil on canvas. 50.2 x 61cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

By including the eggs, by shrinking them in relation to the butter, Vollon not only causes us to think about the difficulty of first separating and then churning enough milk fat into butter,² but he also challenges us to confront the sickening sense stirred up by the possible consequences of consuming too much butter, an apprehension that was recognized in countless cooking manuals from the time. In his popular 1894 *Recette pratiques concernant la cuisine maigre*, for example, Oscar-Edmond Ris-Paquot describes the likely outcome of eating too much butter: 'Beurre.—C'est l'ennemi des tempéraments bilieux, il échauffe et affaiblit l'estomac par un usage prolongé, aussi, doit-on s'abstenir de le manger en tartine ou avec les hors-d'oeuvre. Absorbé en trop grande quantité, il [le beurre] fatigue et irrite l'estomac' (3).

This understanding of the ill effects of eating butter in large quantities is made all the more overpowering in Vollon's painting by the very real potential for that butter spoiling, especially if we consider it within the context of French dairy production and

food storage practices of the late nineteenth century. The subject of how best to preserve butter was, in fact, quite popular in contemporary cooking and domestic manuals. In her 1863 *La Cuisinière des ménages ou manuel pratique de cuisine*, Mme. Rosalie Blanquet articulates some options for safeguarding freshly churned butter:

Le beurre récent doit être conservé dans un lieu très frais ou tenu dans un vase placé dans l'eau fraîche qu'on renouvelle plusieurs fois par jour, ou enveloppé dans un linge, qu'on tient toujours humide. Mais quelles que soient les précautions qu'on prenne, il ne tarde pas, surtout lorsqu'il fait chaud, à s'altérer au contact de l'air et à devenir rance. La fabrication du beurre n'étant pas égale dans toutes les saisons, il faut donc, pour le préserver de toute altération, employer des moyens de conservation qui consistent à le saler et à le fondre (491).

Clearly, the softening and glistening mass of exposed butter in Vollon's painting has not been protected by either Mme. Blanquet's or any of the other methods that were deemed necessary for keeping it from becoming rancid. Instead, this butter has been left to spoil. Furthermore, if we imagine the length of time it could have taken Vollon to paint his mass of butter and the possibility that the image could have been executed during the summer, we can suppose that, by the end of the 'sitting', his subject would have become discolored, inedible, useless.³

Echoing Mme. Blanquet's recommendations over forty years later in her *La Maison rustique des dames*, Mme. Millet-Robinet also warns her readers that:

Le beurre frais, exposé à l'air, s'altère promptement. Sa nuance devient plus foncée, son odeur est rance, sa saveur est âcre. Ces alterations, d'autant plus rapides que la température est plus chaude, sont dues à un commencement de fermentation. Pour conserver le beurre frais, il faut donc le placer dans un endroit frais, dans une cave, une pièce froide, d'une propreté extrême où on ne loge ni bière, ni vin, ni cidre, fromages, matières végétales peuvent entrer en décomposition. Il faut enfin le soustraire au contact de l'air, qui développe la fermentation (249).⁴

Mme. Millet-Robinet advocates similar, though more detailed processes than did her predecessors for ensuring the freshness of butter, indicating that dairy preservation practices had not substantially changed in almost half a century. And given the abundance of texts published in France between 1850 and the beginning of the twentieth century that take as their focus this issue, we can surmise that safeguarding the freshness of butter was still of considerable concern and continued to pose a real challenge.

So apparent was the problem of the fragility of the useable life of butter that in 1866⁵ Napoleon III established a competition to encourage the production of a substance that would take longer to spoil than butter but still be economical and pleasantly consumable, particularly to the crews of the Imperial army and navy. Monsieur Mège-Mouriès, a chemist and the only person to enter the contest, invented margarine, which was made by emulsifying and churning rendered beef fat, water, and casein, and so received the patent.⁶ In early 1870 he set up a factory in Poissy, which he quickly closed at the advent of the Franco-Prussian War on July 19, 1870. But he continued to work on his recipe, improving its taste, bettering his substitute's buttery

attributes, spreading the word of its success to other countries. According to Henry Mott in his 1876 *Complete History and Process of Manufacture of Artificial Butter*, Mège-Mouriès was issued a patent in the United States in 1873 (3). In 1874, he took out another patent in France and described an even newer method for producing what was termed ‘Margarine-Mouriès’: ‘I have only to churn my margarine with a specially prepared mixture of cream and milk and a dash of butter to obtain the taste of sweet cream from the farms. By then smoothing out the mass obtained after churning, I can get a product which, in addition to the taste, has the consistency of butter and can be used exactly like butter’ (cited in Guy 184).

By 1880, the Société de Santé, with pressure from the dairy industry, intervened and ruled that margarine could be sold only if it was clearly labeled as such. And the Académie des Sciences declared that it not be used in public establishments, claiming that: ‘Margarine contains a much greater quantity of fatty acids than does butter: this proportion is too strong for the fat to be completely emulsified and for the organism to be able to absorb it. That deficient assimilation could have a bad effect on the bodily equilibrium. In addition there is nothing to insure that the margarine manufacturers always use fully guaranteed materials’ (cited in Guy 185). The Académie did, however, make one concession by allowing margarine to be used ‘for certain stews and vegetables, but never [...] for cooking potatoes’ (cited in Guy 185). Needless to say, the short-lived and limited popularity in France of the virtually unspoilable margarine was pretty much over by the mid 1880s even though it remained fashionable for its lower price and sustainability in parts of Europe where the dairy industry was less advanced.

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What may have seemed like a digression into the politics of margarine production tells us something we likely already knew but that, for the purposes of my argument, I would like to highlight: that butter held a significant place in the French gastronomic imagination during the second half of the nineteenth century and that it had no acceptable substitute. Butter was and is indisputably important culinarily, but as a subject for a painting, it remains curious and begs the more specific question—why would an artist, born in Lyon in 1833 and famous during his lifetime mainly for his still lifes of flowers, fruit, copper pots, earthen jugs, and dead game, not to mention *singeries* (images of monkeys doing anything but the business of monkeys), have chosen to paint on a small canvas a large mass of butter and two little eggs? Vollon only one other time included butter in a composition, which is not surprising since, as we can imagine, it would have been quite a challenge to preserve the butter’s shape, to paint a transmogrifying substance. In *Still Life*, which most likely predates *Mound of Butter*, the irregular though roughly rectangular slab of butter is represented in direct proportion to the other objects in the painting.⁷ To be sure, the overall sense of balance ascribed to each element alone and collectively in *Still Life* even further underscores the very lack of balance, the patent disinterest in maintaining a semblance of stability in *Mound of Butter*.

Eggs, unlike butter, appear often in Vollon’s body of work. Certainly incongruous in the hands of a monkey, the eggs in *A Monkey Frying Eggs* from 1865-70 [Fig. 2 http://www.wildenstein.com/exhibits/vollon/images/5_singeries/5a.jpg] are also proportionally too big in relation to the animal and the pan in which they fry. Vollon even further accentuates these incongruities by placing the cracked parts of two absurdly large eggshells next to a frail-looking chop on the ground at the monkey’s

side. But the scale discrepancies in this image of a monkey performing a human task only serve to enhance the humorousness and sense of the ridiculous that a scene such as this is meant to evoke, whereas the size inconsistencies that we find in *Mound of Butter* have the more disconcerting effect of troubling our prospects for equilibrium, of leaving us on startlingly shaky ground.

In *Kitchen Still Life with Fried Eggs and Shrimp* of about 1875-80 [Fig. 3 http://www.wildenstein.com/exhibits/vollon/images/7_kitchen/7d.jpg], the vivid, yellow egg yolks which provide a stark juxtaposition to the vibrant orange of the two shrimp and the pale pink stripe on the cloth, seem to crackle still with the heat upon which they were prepared. With this small painting, we better understand the relationships among objects, how they fit together in more reasonable ways. The partially drained tumbler of amber-hued liquid in the middle ground resonates as a kind of metaphor for the very process of preparing a meal, itself interpretable as an indirect and reassuring reference to the act of painting.

However, it is the dynamically-poised eggs in *Still Life with Peonies, Celery, and a Slice of Pumpkin* from between 1880 and 1890 [Fig. 4 http://www.wildenstein.com/exhibits/vollon/images/7_kitchen/7a.jpg] that are perhaps the most compelling point of comparison with those in *Mound of Butter*. In the former, two eggs are rendered in proportionate scale with the wedge of pumpkin and stalk of celery next to which they are situated. Turned toward each other as if in conversation, these opaque orbs are a vivid reminder of what we should see as Vollon's very explicit choice to make the size relationship between the butter and the eggs so exceedingly fraught in *Mound of Butter*.

Restrained and diffident in their presence, the eggs in *Mound of Butter* are held in a delicate though dialectical balance with the robust density of the butter at the base of which they lie. Their chalky whiteness plays up the luxuriousness of the golden butter, plays down the greying white of the length of cheese cloth that edges it. The eggs are posed precariously—one perched too closely to the lip of the wooden table, the other balanced insecurely on an end. They are harbingers of the ever-present potential for disaster, for at any moment, the egg on its end could topple and cause the one on its side to slide off the table, crack on the unseen floor, and create an unusable mess. Even if we do not immediately recognize it, for one has, of course, to imagine a scenario like the one I just described, the most basic underpinnings of French gastronomy—butter and eggs—are here rendered distressingly out of kilter. They are even united in their shared fragility for the perilous position of the eggs more deeply compounds our sense of the vulnerability of the exposed butter and vice versa.

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When I first saw *Mound of Butter* in the Small French Paintings Gallery at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, I was immediately struck by just this sense—that something was not quite right. I was simultaneously drawn in by the sumptuous brushwork, by the way that Vollon somehow imbued his representation with a tangible physicality, by the way that he made the very materiality of the butter itself collapse into its own representation. The two mingled for me—the disconcerting elements of the picture along with its factual bravura, its cleverly finessed analogy between butter and pigment. Vollon gives us a close up of the butter, so close, in fact, that we can see its dazzling licks of paint, with a more distant view of the eggs, so powdery in substance that their surfaces almost blur. The small size of the canvas

only heightens our awareness of these dramatic shifts in proximity and scale, for the mound of butter seems that much bigger and the eggs that much more diminished in relation to it. Indeed, this painting is both pleasurable and perplexing at once. And this is where my fascination with Vollon's mound of butter lies—in the ways in which it flirts concurrently with the domestic, plain and simple, and that which is anything but. The discrepancy between the size of the eggs and the heap of butter is what primarily generates this unseemliness, but so does the shape of the butter, which appears to refer to things other than itself. Like a mountain looming up over two boulders or the result of an archaeological dig—somehow both seem fitting—this craggy, caked, and peaked mass is both formless and formed, both eaten away by the elements and encrusted with the earth from which it was dug. Layered, in palimpsestic layers, Vollon's *Mound of Butter* simultaneously hides and reveals its own excavation.

To continue the archaeological metaphor, the metaphor that generates a narrative in which something that has been buried or that exists beneath the surface is unearthed, we may also see in Vollon's butter a mass of modeling clay, a damp cloth around its base to keep it from drying. At least since the 1770s when the story of a young Antonio Canova carving the head of a lion out of butter with a kitchen knife began to circulate, the creative connection between clay and butter has been in place.⁸ Even Émile Zola associated the two when he described in *Le Ventre de Paris* in 1873: 'Sur les deux étagères de la boutique, au fond, s'alignaient des mottes de beurre énormes; les beurres de Bretagne, dans des paniers, débordaient; les beurres de Normandie, enveloppés de toile, ressemblaient à des ébauches de ventres, sur lesquelles un sculpteur aurait jeté des linges mouillés' (478). Like Zola, Vollon so clearly wants us to make this comparison between butter and a mass of clay—abandoned briefly—with which one could create a sculpture. The sculptor's tool, here posing as a wooden butter knife or spatula, is wedged indelicately into the side of the mound, thereby suggesting a kind of sculpting and smoothing of the edges where Vollon's 'knife' has taken material away. If we assume, and I think we should, that Vollon used a palette knife to fashion the impastoed surface of the butter, yet another intriguing level of interpretation emerges, for we may then also see this object that penetrates the side of the butter as a witty self-referential stand in for the painter's tool as well. The sculptor's instrument/painter's palette knife/butter spatula marks this as a representation that is in process; and by representation I mean both the painting—its form and content—and the mound of clay I see within it. An inscription of the artifice of artfulness within the realm of this still life, a sign of the artist's touch, of his having just been there, this 'knife' cuts both ways. Jammed in at an impossible angle, one that visually defies gravity no matter the substance it pierces, it also bodies forth a kind of violence. I would even argue that the 'knife' is located at the 'throat' of the head that seems to be emerging out of the 'clay'.

This might appear to be a bold statement, perhaps too bold for a painting so elegantly rendered, so ostensibly innocuous. But the visual evidence insists upon just such an uncanny association. Indeed, if we trace Sigmund Freud's theory as he describes it in his 1919 essay, '*Das Unheimliche*', we may begin to parse even more precisely what is so disconcerting about *Mound of Butter*. Freud's *Unheimliche*, or uncanny, roughly translates further into English as the unhomely, something that is eerily familiar but also not. In the case of Vollon's painting, the 'home' is the butter to which the representation refers and which we can see is mimetically there, just that, a depiction of a mound of butter, its specificity as such additionally underscored by its thick and creamy, even buttery density. But the image, while eerily familiar, is also

jarringly not, because it seems not simply to be a representation of butter, of the 'home'. That this yellow mass also conjures things quite incongruent from what it purports to depict is, in fact, a function of how convincing the representation is at establishing its own butteriness in the first place. In other words, it is because the mound does so much look like and invoke the feel of butter that also seeing in it sculpting clay and a decapitated head engenders this irrepressible sense of uncanniness.

In Freud's terms, 'the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar' (17: 220). Because the depicted are butter and eggs, things so long familiar, so much a part of daily life, the uncanniness roused by the painting—by its size discrepancies and inchoate allusions—becomes all the more pungent. Architectural historian and critic Anthony Vidler glosses the larger ramifications of this idea when he writes that: 'For Freud, 'unhomeliness' was more than a simple sense of not belonging: it was the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream' (7). The familiar, to follow Vidler's logic, contains within it the threat of becoming defamiliarized, of becoming strange to those who hold it closest. In Vollon's image, the referent—butter—is always already there, haunting the other associations we make between the whirl of *matière* and the mass of clay that seems to be evolving into the shape of a severed head. And the reverse is true as well; the clay and head, once you see them, remain ghostly presences that inflect our perception of the butter and remind us of the tacit knowledge that the familiar 'may turn on its owners'. 'Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them', Freud goes on to write (17: 244). That it is a severed head that I most immediately see in Vollon's picture, then, even further heightens the persistent sense of the uncanny, a sense that whether overtly recognized or not, is already present, an unexpected assonance, in this deceptively innocent image of butter and eggs.

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The decapitated head itself, of course, has a long and firmly entrenched history in the French cultural imagination. It unquestionably conjures up the brutal memory of the 1789 guillotine and its aftermath, of the severed head being waved by its hair or trotted through the crowd on a pike, a memory that may have dimmed quite a bit by the late 1870s, but that was still embedded nonetheless, a repressed memory, to use another Freudian locution. Perhaps what I perceive as Vollon's excursion into this territory of decapitation, albeit in veiled terms, is an expression of that memory that continued to find its way both directly and indirectly into literature and visual culture at the time. The abundance of images from the second half of the nineteenth century representing Salomé, for example, certainly emphasizes this point. According to Charles Bernheimer, in Europe between 1870 and 1920, over one thousand depictions of Salomé appeared in the visual arts, literature, and music (104).⁹ The pictures, operas, plays, and poems that feature this woman who beheaded her victim may on the surface symbolize aspects of a powerful biblical story, but they may also simultaneously evoke the guillotine of a century earlier. It is in some part likely because of this association with what Michel Foucault called 'the spectacle of the scaffold' (32-69) that this subject matter re-emerged so forcefully during the second half of the nineteenth century.

According to Bram Dijkstra, more chronologically immediate events may also have played a role in the resurgence of images of Salomé at the time. He argues that this femme fatale's prevalence materialized in particular relation to France's devastating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, following which anxieties associated with emasculation dramatically increased.¹⁰ He also sees a connection between Salomé's popularity and the (likely fictitious, but widely-spread) stories of the *pétroleuses* who cavorted in their victims' blood after popular uprisings at the time of the 1871 Paris Commune (398). In short, the increase in depictions of the beheading (and therefore emasculating) Salomé not surprisingly coincided with larger national worries that were linked to humiliating failure at war and a heightened sense of masculine powerlessness.

Seeking to understand further the explosion of what he aptly terms Salomania in fin de siècle France, Bernheimer critiques Dijkstra's theory and ultimately contends that: 'Although there can be little doubt that many of the fears generated by the fin de siècle crisis of masculine identity were projected onto the figure of Salome [sic], there can be just as little doubt that this projection rapidly became a popular style of representation rather than the felt expression of cultural malaise' (106). Bernheimer thus promotes a simultaneously historical and ahistorical explanation for the Salomania that bloomed throughout France. But what he calls a 'projection,' I would describe as an inscription, a more active and reciprocal engagement between social and cultural histories. And his argument that there is a firm distinction between style and cultural expressions seems equally insufficient as an explanation for what I see as an inextricable interplay. Whatever the possible reasons for the revival of interest in Salomé in the late nineteenth century, the result is that visual and textual representations of this biblical princess both with and without the head of John the Baptist abound during these years.¹¹

Vollon's image of butter that also seems to suggest a head severed from a body could certainly not *purposefully* be redolent of the decapitated head of St. John, the bodily violence associated with the guillotine, the Franco-Prussian War, or the Commune. But I would maintain that these possibilities are as enticing as more generally interpreting Vollon's gesture as a not-so-subtle illustration of the quick slippage from what is acceptable to what plainly is not. By showing how easily one merges into the other, Vollon exposes, whether knowingly or not, the very artifice that lies at the heart of the practice of painting. He may indeed have been interested in conveying how the representation especially of inanimate things, of objects in a still life, may over-represent. Called the Chardin of the late nineteenth century, Vollon was deeply invested in elevating the status of the still life at a time when it was simply not in fashion. Using this painting as a site upon which to explore the kinds of formal inventiveness that some of his contemporaries like Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas were investigating in their more controversial (at least for the time), though certainly fashionable, paintings of modern life subjects, Vollon could very well have recognized the power of the still life to exceed expectation. For here he swerves towards referencing the human figure, the stock of biblical, military, and history painting, which is what the Salon critics and by extension the malleable viewing public most valued.¹² As Carol Forman Tabler points out in her analysis of Vollon's 1880 *Courge*, by implying an 'anthropomorphic potential' in his representation of a plump pumpkin, Vollon was seeking to gain critical notice for the undervalued genre of the still life, 'literally upgrading it to rival figure painting' (Tabler unpaginated). Indeed, even the most subtle scent of anthropomorphism could have been perceived as nudging the depiction of objects in this direction. One could argue that *Mound of Butter* in particular, because

it is so dramatically different in subject and style from his others, because it takes such unexpected risks, was an experiment of this sort, a kind of cheeky melding of body part with milk product .

Critics of his time and the few scholars who have written about him since have described Vollon as having come of age at the cusp of Romanticism and Realism; that stylistically, he engages both traditions (Weisberg 223). To be sure, even though this supposed engagement reminds us just how little categories work, just how much they diminish complexity, the fact remains that during his lifetime, Vollon was considered by his contemporaries as having a foot in the Romantic tradition even as he forged a new kind of naturalism. During these years, it was Théodore Géricault who was deemed one of the most purely Romantic of the Romantic painters. Whether Vollon would have been familiar specifically with Géricault's images of severed heads and incandescent body parts is not incontrovertibly known. However we do learn from an 1884 essay by writer and critic Jules Claretie that the artist displayed multiple images of Géricault's horses in his studio on the Boulevard de Clichy, which certainly suggests that Vollon would likely have been interested in the entire oeuvre of Géricault (214-215). And in her discussion of Vollon's *Le Cochon*, Forman Tabler further supports a claim for Vollon's abiding loyalty toward Géricault: 'For inspiration in this instance, Vollon would have looked not so much to Rembrandt but to a more recent French predecessor, Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), whom he much admired. For example, Géricault's grim still lifes of amputated limbs, which conjure up images of horror coupled with repugnance, demonstrate a curious kinship with *Le Cochon*' (22).

Most famous today for his 1819 *The Raft of the Medusa*, Géricault also painted numerous small and sensitive images of various body parts, which are likely not directly related to the production of *The Raft of the Medusa*, though they have consistently been identified as such. Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer has, indeed, produced the most convincing argument for this group of body parts as she situates them historically within the context of post-Terror France, when the threat of the guillotine still loomed, and argues that:

With their bloody gashes brutally exhibited, their eyes rolling in anguish, their features distorted in pain, Géricault's depictions of beheaded victims, drawn or painted, can only be understood in this context of impassioned debate, in which scientific, humanitarian, and political discourses mingled and intersected. Their imagery is unthinkable without the lingering threat of the guillotine during the Restoration and, beyond it, the disquieting memory of the revolutionary Terror to which it pointed. Indeed, Géricault's blunt realism is more eloquent about the collective trauma of postrevolutionary French society than many a set of contemporary memoirs (609).

Concrete, richly painted, almost abstract, Géricault's still lifes of arms, legs, and heads have been rendered with a care that seems to be in direct contradiction to their subject. Seen in profile, the lifeless head in *Head of a Guillotined Man* from 1818-1819 [Fig. 5 <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/119264>], though blatantly gruesome, is also surprisingly touching. Perhaps it is the meticulousness of the small wisps of facial hair, or the sharp flicker of the single tooth that emerges from between the victim's parted upper and lower lips, or maybe it is the intricate precision of the startlingly delicate ear that generates this sensation. Now in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, this picture was owned during Vollon's lifetime

by the painter Auguste Boulard, who kept it at his home in Paris until his death in 1897. Like Vollon, Boulard was a frequent exhibitor at the annual salon and it is probable that they knew each other and therefore also quite possible that Vollon was aware of Géricault's painting.

While I am not trying to make a definitive declaration that Vollon knew this painting or, if he did, that he consciously referenced it in *Mound of Butter*, I am opening up the suggestive possibility. We know so little about Vollon that it would be hard to prove this or that he wanted to capture the cultural memory of the guillotine as perceptibly as did Géricault, who, unlike Vollon, was quite vocal about his politics. What we do know is what we can see and that is that Vollon imbues his butter with a kind of corporeality, a kind of bodiliness. He does not, however, tend to make organic matter take on the bulk and consistency of the body in his many other still lifes. In *A Kitchen Still Life with Plums* from between 1870 and 1879 [Fig. 6 http://www.wildenstein.com/exhibits/vollon/images/7_kitchen/7n.jpg], for example, inanimate objects are depicted with an animated luster. A dash of thick white pigment on the edge of a pot and a quick stroke of pink on the surface of a ceramic pitcher enliven the picture plane; as does the formal conversation forged among three dusty plums, each balanced in what Gabriel Weisberg has identified as Vollon's more general interest in 'careful disarray' (228). Vollon's slightly earlier paintings, such as *Still Life with Imari Vase, Porcelain Bowls, Fruit and a Pâté en croûte* from 1865-70 [Fig. 7 http://www.wildenstein.com/exhibits/vollon/images/7_kitchen/7l.jpg], offer less a sense of the liveliness of individual objects and more of an awareness of the artful choreography of the whole, as a piece of hard edged, expensive, imported porcelain draws attention to the gracefulness of a cluster of glistening grapes and a delicate, thin-lipped bowl that barely contains its pile of peaches and translucent grapes.

Mound of Butter is unquestionably different from Vollon's other still lifes. Featuring a transient substance, this canvas—in both paint handling and subject—enacts its own temporality. Somehow even this disturbs, this choice that Vollon made to paint a melting substance. Nowhere else in his oeuvre is the natural rendered so unnatural; the ordinary this much transmuted into the extraordinary. Indeed, he challenges the viewer in new ways with this painting. It is the most volatile of his still lifes; it is a representation in process, just emerging, unstable. And for these reasons, *Mound of Butter* demands the most nuanced and evocative of readings. Whether Vollon meant for us to see his mass of butter in the ways that I have suggested will likely remain a mystery. But what is there in the painting is simply there. This butter is at the fine edge between the representation of butter for its own sake and a teasing suggestion of something else. Here, the physicality of paint has been transformed into a physiognomy; the repressed has reared its head. Vollon's frothy flurry of golden *matière* has steered the promise of a simple meal towards an uncanny experience.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Figure 1: Antoine Vollon. *Mound of Butter*. 1875-85. Oil on canvas. 50.2 x 61cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Chester Dale Fund.
- Figure 2: Antoine Vollon. *Monkey Frying Eggs*. 1865-70. Oil on canvas. 61 x 50.7cm. Private Collection.
- Figure 3: Antoine Vollon. *Kitchen Still Life with Fried Eggs and Shrimp*. 1875-80. Oil on panel. 21.4 x 26.2cm. Private Collection.
- Figure 4: Antoine Vollon. *Still Life with Peonies, Celery and a Slice of Pumpkin*. 1880-90. Oil on canvas. 50.5 x 61.4cm. Private Collection.
- Figure 5: Théodore Géricault. *Head of a Guillotined Man*. 1818-19. Oil on panel. 41 x 38cm. Art Institute of Chicago. Mary F.S. Worcester Collection, through prior gift of William Wood Prince and L.L. and A.S. Coburn Endowment.
- Figure 6: Antoine Vollon. *A Kitchen Still Life with Plums*. 1870-79. Oil on panel. 21.8 x 16.3cm. Private Collection.
- Figure 7: Antoine Vollon. *Still Life with Imari Vase, Porcelain Bowls, Fruit and a Pâté en croûte*. 1865-70. Oil on canvas. 46.3 x 38.5. Private Collection.

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NOTES

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¹ I thank Emma Weiss for pointing this out to me, thus spurring me on to find out contemporary statistics for the volume of milk required to produce certain quantities of butter.

² It was not until 1877 that a mechanical method utilising centrifugal force was invented for separating cream from milk. Before this, milk would be left to stand for between twelve and forty-eight hours in order to effect this separation (Aikman 120).

³ This is in direct contradiction to what we know from Vollon's biographer, Etienne Martin, who recounts that the artist, who had a studio near Les Halles, initially turned to the subject of still life with food because 'les victuailles quotidiennes qui séjournèrent dans l'atelier avant d'arriver à la cuisine et servaient ainsi à deux fins'(14). See also Przyblyski 102-103 on this point.

⁴ I am grateful to Lise Schreier for finding, scanning, and sending this text to me.

⁵ Some sources cite both 1868 and 1870 as the year of the competition; however it seems unlikely that it could have taken place as late as 1870 since most agree that Mège-Mouriès was issued a patent for producing margarine in England in 1869.

⁶ Mège-Mouriès is referred to as an engineer in some texts.

⁷ See Galerie Bruno Meissner. *XVeme Biennale Internationale des Antiquaires* exh. cat. Paris, Grand Palais, September 21-October 10, 1990 for a color reproduction of this painting.

⁸ This connection has certainly been in place since. For example, in 1992 Janine Antoni, used a 600-pound block of lard as the basis for part of her installation *Gnaws*. In this piece, Antoni explored, among other things, the construction of femininity by biting chunks of lard from the cube, chewing them, then fashioning those bits into lipsticks. And in several untitled 1993-94 sculptures, Robert Gober created almost human-sized sticks of butter out of pigmented beeswax. Lying on their open wrappers, which are made of vellum, these sticks of butter, to use Ronald Jones's words: 'Bring to mind stale jokes Butter, being fat, is organic, and once lived inside a body, before being funnelled into the realm of the outside, of the dead. And now, unprotected by their wrappers, Gober's butter sticks seem as vulnerable as life itself' (unpaginated). Jones' point about butter manifesting the inside/outside and living/dead dialectic is intriguing. Between 1994 and 1996, Gober also constructed a colonial American butter churn from bronze, shoe polish, plaster, and paint, this time representing what one could interpret as the intermediary between inside and outside. I thank Roberta Smith and Jerry Saltz for calling these more contemporary instances of artists exploring the complexity inherent in the representation of butter to my attention.

⁹ Bernheimer also points out that this statistic does not include the hundreds of sketches Gustave Moreau made of Salomé (104).

¹⁰ For more detailed discussion of this point, see Garb 34. This theme, while not her sole focus, is also addressed throughout Clayson's book.

¹¹ Some depictions of the story of Salomé show only the decapitated head of St. John the Baptist.

¹² Carol Forman Tabler discusses the responses of contemporary critics and caricaturists who identified a human figure in Vollon's *Courge* when it was exhibited at the 1880 Salon.