

Limited Revisions: Academic Art History Confronts Academic Art

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In an interview published shortly after the inauguration of the Musée d'Orsay in December 1986, Michel Laclotte provided some insight into the process for selecting works for the gallery's display of paintings. Raising the vexed question of the presence of 'artistes pompiers' in the museum, he offers a revealing and symbolically eloquent anecdote. At one point during the planning stage there was a move to exhibit *The Knight of the Flowers*, an academic work by Georges-Antoine Rochegrosse, depicting Parsifal surrounded in a meadow by a crowd of naked girls who surge up from the undergrowth to lure him from his duty. The painting was brought before the selection committee, but was greeted by such derision that it was hurriedly returned to the reserve. Through such rigorous means, Laclotte maintains, the museum has been saved from the taint of 'pictorial vulgarity'.¹

For anyone vaguely familiar with the nineteenth century, the broad outlines of Laclotte's story must seem eerily reminiscent. The tale normally follows a slightly different pattern, however, generally involving an equally unsympathetic encounter between an earlier generation of enemies of pictorial vulgarity — the members of the Salon jury — and some hapless member of the avant-garde. The curatorial sniggers at the Gare d'Orsay have also been heard before — they echoed around the pavillion on the Place de l'Alma where Manet exhibited his work in 1867, and could be heard again at the Indépendant shows of the following decade. By an ironic reversal of fate, however, today it is Rochegrosse, four-time medal winner at the Salon and award winner at the Expositions universelles of 1889 and 1900, who is the victim of official reproof. The 'pompiers' are the new 'refusés'.

Yet Rochegrosse and artists like him are not entirely friendless. The Musée d'Orsay itself provides perverse testimony of this, since the origins of the museum and the relative catholicity of the work it contains owe much to the reassessment of the nineteenth century which has occurred over the last twenty years. Orsay's curatorial staff strenuously deny any revisionist intent, however — the museum's director, Françoise Cachin, has even gone so far as to claim that she and her colleagues would feel a sense of failure should the visitor come away with such an impression.² Yet, despite these denials, the presence — however peripheral — of works by artists such as Bouguereau, Cabanel, Laurens and Detaille tells its own story. What is most intriguing is

why they should prove sufficiently embarrassing to the museum's staff for their relatively modest presence to be so insistently played down.

The answer to this question lies less perhaps in the isolated merits of any particular artist championed by revisionist historians than in the perceived threat posed by the revisionist campaign as a whole to the carefully constructed edifice of modernism. For, in its most radical manifestations, revisionism implies a whole-scale rewriting of nineteenth-century art history, a drastic reassessment of values which fundamentally questions the consecrated narrative of formal experimentation and progressive development which has long been the mainstay of 'the Whig interpretation of art history'. It is this apparent attempt to erode one of the cornerstones of the discipline, to interrogate the assumptions which for over half a century have sustained study of one of its most privileged areas, which has provoked such sustained — and on occasions hysterical — opposition from within the modernist camp and perhaps helps to explain the reticence of Orsay's curatorial team. On one level, it would be easy enough to interpret the cries of outrage and resentment which have greeted the steady trickle of revisionist monographs and exhibitions as a classic instance of territorial protection, a polemical reflex triggered to ward off predatory interlopers from the jealously defended 'chasse gardée' of the 'Impressionist era' and its antecedents. Seen in such a light, this new 'battle of the ancients and moderns' amounts to little more than a conservative establishment rallying to suppress the potentially subversive challenge of historical heterodoxy. Yet, as this study will attempt to demonstrate, the controversy surrounding revisionism is far more complex, its elements much more ambiguous, than such a manichean assessment of the debate would allow. By examining claims and counter-claims, revisionist attacks and modernist reproofs, I shall suggest that in their most extreme form the concerns subtending recent re-interpretations of the nineteenth century are moral and ideological rather than historical — that, indeed, despite their appeal to history for a more comprehensive view of the period, they all too often remain as essentially hostile to true historical understanding as the most pure-bred narratives of 'the story of modern art'.

As early as 1969 the American art historian Robert Rosenblum could introduce a loan exhibition of



Fig. 1. Louis-Hector Leroux: *Herculaneum*, 23 août, an 79. Salon of 1881. Musée des beaux-arts, Dijon.

nineteenth-century French painting with a surprisingly upbeat assessment of the catholicity of contemporary taste. 'More and more detached from the passions that used to be aroused by the championing of the origins of the modernist tradition', he declared, 'we can begin to relax and to re-examine the vast and unwieldy pictorial heritage of the last century.' Within this new climate of tolerance and dispassionate historical investigation, he believed, received traditions were beginning to be questioned, previously accepted accounts of progressive stylistic development enriched by a more searching investigation of the century's pictorial output, and the dominant litany of '-isms' abandoned in favour of a broadly inclusive, less simplistically teleological, vision of the period — 'today, in 1969, this linear history and this dramatic parable of the battle of aesthetic good and evil no longer satisfy the curious historian and the adventurous spectator.'³ Rosenblum's infectious optimism has withstood the passage of time; some twenty years on, he was able to look back over the intervening decades and pronounce the battle won. The revisionist revolution, he claimed, was now a *fait accompli* which had radically transformed perceptions of the previous century, revealing the historical interest and aesthetic merits of virtually every facet of its visual culture.⁴

Judging from the reaction he provoked, Rosenblum's assessment of the scholarly climate in 1969 might appear a little premature — and one could argue that the situation has changed only superfi-

cially over time. Some five years after his observations on the new climate of tolerance, Rosenblum was specifically taken to task by Douglas Cooper, for whom his exhibition was symptomatic of a more pervasive corruption gnawing at the heart of academe. Alarmed by a spate of recent retrospectives devoted to Couture, Gérôme, Bouguereau and Gleyre, he issued a stern rebuff to their misguided organisers:

Inspired by a certain form of intellectual perversion, these exhibitions — conceivable within the cloistered surroundings of a university faculty — help to increase prevailing aesthetic confusion (through the attraction they exert over a public which is extremely ignorant about artistic matters) and encourage a real falsification of history: in effect, they tend to place minor artists who enjoyed only short-lived success, and whose low quality work has had absolutely no influence, on the same level as true creators who have enriched tradition and who still remain the glory of the French school.⁵

Cooper has not been alone in expressing such violent distaste at attempts to sully the 'splendid accomplishments of Impressionism' by resurrecting the 'grotesque paintings' and 'horrible canvas[es]'⁶ of their less innovative contemporaries. Most notoriously, John Rewald's foreword to the 1980 Pissarro retrospective vilified those 'souvenir hunters who are presently "rediscovering", or even "rehabilitating" various producers of anaemic Salon wares' for their 'dangerous manipulation that diverts the powerful

flow of the mainstream of history'.⁷ Like Cooper, Rewald's reproach focused on the presumption and injustice of contaminating the linear narrative of the triumphs and tribulations of the avant-garde by renewed interest in their erstwhile 'enemies' — in a very real way, he maintained, the rehabilitation of the academic tradition was a corruption of history, since it implied some sort of comparability between a 'dried-out practitioner' such as Gérôme and a major figure like Pissarro, 'whose perceptions and creative powers remained fresh and vivid until the last'.⁸

On a very overt level, the Campaign for Real History promoted by Rewald and Cooper, and supported by a small band of more discreet antirevisionists, is inspired by a vigorous sense of moral indignation. Regarding the obscurity to which nineteenth-century academics have long been consigned as just retribution for their arrogant and intolerant treatment of the avant-garde, they view not simply with equanimity but with positive approval the expulsion of great swathes of the period's pictorial production to a permanent limbo of aesthetic contempt. For Rewald, these 'active reactionaries in positions of power' have forfeited all claim to historical consideration, not only for their culpable vendetta against any sign of authentic creativity, but also

for their peddling of 'still-born concepts, antiquated ideals, empty skills, and [their] contemptible willingness to accommodate the conquests of *plein-air* painting to the debased taste of the Salon jury'.⁹ Such cynical opportunism serves as a *leitmotif* in anti-revisionist critiques as a strategy for legitimately marginalising the academic tradition. By portraying its practitioners as complacently pandering to the demands of a callow and uncultivated public, in a climate where 'audience appeal came to be rated above artistic quality',¹⁰ the status of Salon art as a valid subject of art-historical enquiry is effectively called into question. Qualified as 'products of a commercialization of culture' intended to gratify indiscriminating taste rather than pursue more authentically 'creative' ambitions, the genre can be safely categorised with 'such other sub-artistic specialties of the time as the best-selling novel and the popular stage play',¹¹ of interest, if at all, merely to contextualise the genuinely inspired production of its opponents.¹² By castigating their work as an opportunistic and hypocritical concession to repressed sexual curiosities, tailored to excite 'les sadiques et les buveurs de sang en chambre',¹³ opponents of revisionism compound this moral disqualification of the 'Pompier' as objects of historical study. At best, such work might merit condescending recognition



Fig. 2. René Ménéard: *Homère*. Salon of 1885. Present location unknown.

for having 'fulfilled a hygienic function, as the peep show and aphrodisiac of the Salon'.¹⁴ At worst, its transgression of the ostensibly disinterested appeal to more ideated aesthetic sensibilities, identified as central to avant-garde ambitions, deprives it of any claim to serious consideration. The moral bankruptcy of academicism — embracing its personnel, its institutional power, its subject matter and its public — thus validates its exclusion from history. For anti-revisionists such as Cooper and Rewald, revival of interest in 'art pompier' represents a culpable abandonment of the ethical foundations of historical discrimination.

Attacks on revisionism suggest a movement in the grips of a debilitating relativism, unwilling — or incapable — of distinguishing between real artistic achievement and hollow counterfeit. Yet, for many of its defenders, championship of academicism is a moral cause as impassioned as the most vigorous defence of the modernist inheritance. Rather than the relaxed, dispassionate testing of *idees reçues* counselled by Rosenblum, revivalism is frequently conceived as a moral crusade, a battle engaged in defence of an unjustly maligned and persecuted tradition, an assertion of values suppressed by the triumph of modernism.

This intensity of involvement in an urgent moral cause speaks clearly in the language of revisionism. Champions of academicism bring to bear an emotive vocabulary saturated with ethical connotations both to qualify their own position and to describe the characteristics of their objects of study. While Albert Boime has evoked the 'missionary zeal' with which he adopted the "underdog" academicians' in the 1960s and describes himself as having been 'a lone voice in the wilderness of avant-garde neglect',¹⁵ Jacques Foucart rails against French 'dishonour' for failing to recognise Gérôme's aesthetic merits and describes Gerald Ackerman's recent monograph as an act of 'atonement'.¹⁶

The mechanics of atonement apparently involve redressing the balance against the academics through a systematic vindication of their position within the topography of nineteenth-century cultural life. While ostensibly dismantling the received distinction between a reactionary and self-serving clique of establishment mediocrities and an oppressed and courageous avant-garde, revisionists frequently run the risk of simply supplanting it with a new and equally value-laden series of dichotomies. We are told, for example, that many academic stalwarts held political opinions more liberal than their opponents', that their diffidence towards new developments in painting was no more pronounced than that of the Impressionists themselves when confronted by a younger generation of artists, that it was the academics who stayed and fought in 1870 while many independent painters scuttled off into exile.¹⁷ All of these points are perfectly valid and germane to any proper historical assessment, yet the way they are presented all too often implies moral rehabilita-



Fig. 3. Alcide Robaudi: *Saul et la Pythonisse*. Salon of 1885. Present location unknown.

tion rather than any more nuanced attempt to clarify a complex nexus of historical problems. To this degree, advocacy impedes understanding, since it merely replaces one set of assertions with its mirror image. One band of heroes is promoted at the expense of another, mimicking the 'myth of the avant-garde' with a new mythology as hagiographical in tone and complicit in moral identity as the dominant discourse it seeks to question.

The language of morality is also evident in characterisations of individual academic practitioners. The emphasis here buttresses an alternative biographical paradigm and in some measure derives from the sequence of events which punctuate the standard academic career. Biographers of so-called avant-garde figures such as Manet and Van Gogh have habitually worked within a formula which highlights the subject's marginality and struggle for acceptance, contrasting their inspired activity with the ponderous routine of their academic rivals. Such a strategy can obviously have no place within the revisionist narrative, since the artists under consideration were, by definition, all more or less easily assimilated into official cultural institutions. As a consequence, the narrative potential of their life stories tends to be somewhat limited and in many instances is built around the same essential core, symbolised by the Ecole des beaux-arts, the Prix de Rome, the Salon and the Academy. Travel, public

honours and private incident generally provide only a limited opportunity for variety and elicit the need for a different structuring motif for presenting biographical material. In contrast to the strongly individualising tendencies of modernist biographies, the revisionist narrative typically evokes a range of moral characteristics which emphasise and celebrate personal probity and fidelity to tradition. The integrity of the individual, testified in unremitting dedication to labour and devotion to beauty, comes to guarantee the integrity of the work of art itself. Writing of Paul Baudry, for example, Véronique Goarin tells us that 'determination seemed to be his essential character trait' and continually refers to the artist's single-minded ambition, his 'ardeur laborieuse' and the 'acharnement' with which he attempted to perfect his work.¹⁸ Similarly, for Mark Steven Walker, Bouguereau is characterised as a 'determined', 'diligent' and 'industrious personality',¹⁹ while Gerald Ackerman describes Gérôme as a 'serious, careful, thoughtful and conscientious artist' who, he points out somewhat enigmatically, 'never slopped out at the corners'.²⁰

These homely virtues, unfamiliar enough in a discipline more usually concerned with magnifying exotic and exceptional character traits, stand in sharp distinction to the moral opprobrium heaped on such artists by their posthumous opponents. Gérôme, in particular, has habitually been singled out for his irascible intolerance, and condemned for vindictive persecution of the Impressionists. The artist whom Ackerman praises as a 'teacher of integrity'²¹ is, from a different perspective, arraigned for having 'peremptorily inculcated the debilitating discipline of academic instruction'.²² Cabanel is described as having 'absolutely no artistic integrity',²³ Couture, we are told, suffered from 'paranoia, egocentrism, willingness to compromise, and vulgarity',²⁴ while Cormon — 'a boney and ungainly little man, with a jaundiced complexion and bulging, choleric eyes'²⁵ — is even physically denigrated to suggest his personal failings.

While revisionists elide the moral dedication of the artist with the physical appearance of his work, whose highly finished surface embodies the integrity of its making, seen in a different light these very

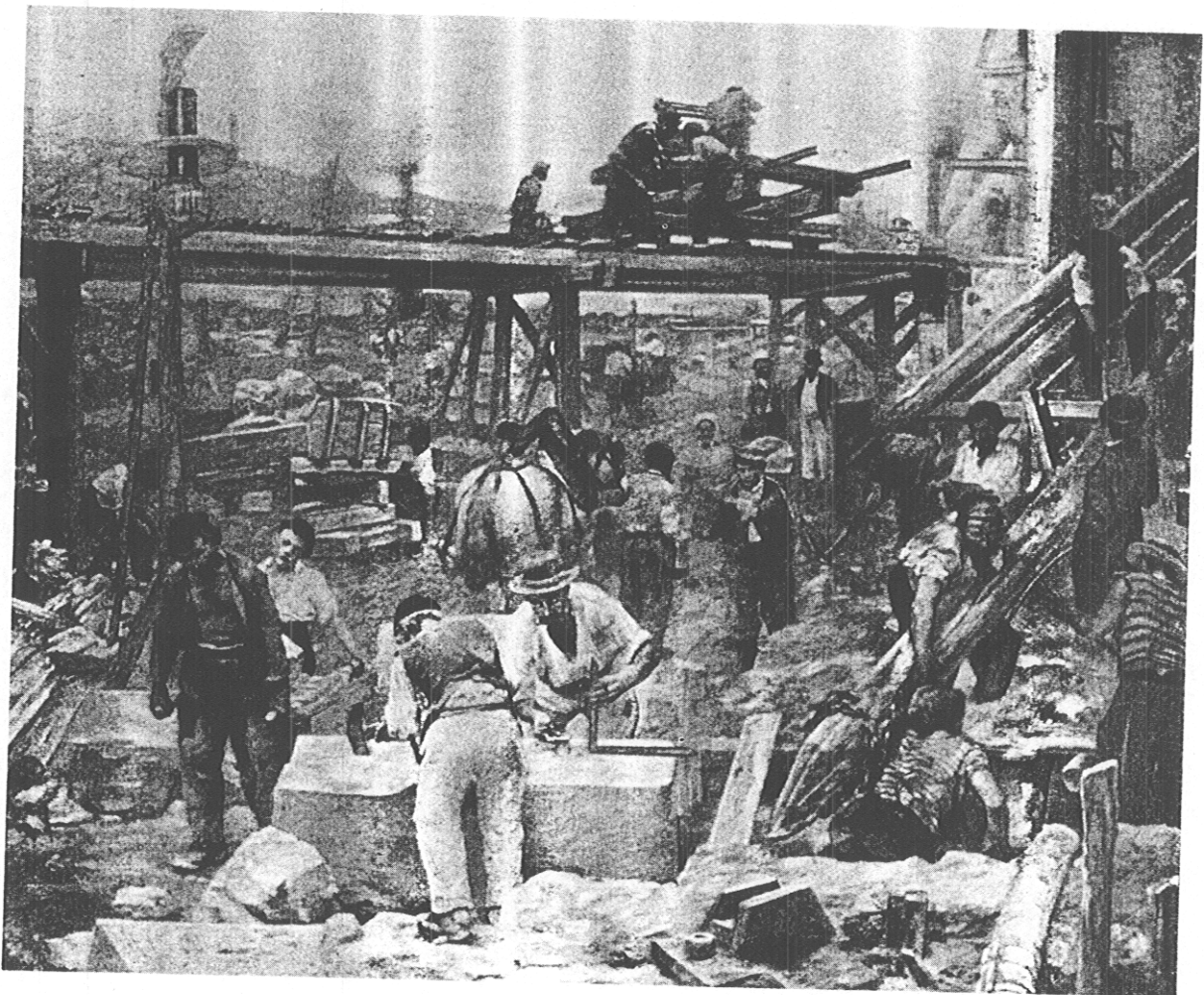


Fig. 4. Alfred Roll: *Le Travail. Chantier de Surène*. Salon of 1885. Present location unknown.

characteristics signify quite contrary values. The attention to illusionist detail, the effacement of the facticity of paint to facilitate unmediated access to the scene portrayed, reveal themselves as an unprincipled denial of the aesthetic process:

if the academic *fini* is work, it is shameful work. It cleans up, rubs out the traces of the real work, erases the evidence of the brush strokes, glosses over the rough edges of the forms, fills in the broken lines, hides the fact that the picture is a real object made out of paint. Art now becomes the slave of the rendering of texture and surfaces, turns itself into a transparent medium for an imaginary world.²⁶

Work — real work, the work of real artists — thus has less to do with diligence and industriousness than with more intangible characteristics, given physical form in the network of brushstrokes whose insistent presence ostensibly communicates a higher form of integrity through the denial of transparent illusionism. Such work — ultimately spiritual rather than manual — is said to transcend the laborious, artisanal dexterity of academicism whose treacherous facility was conveyed across generations of 'conforming artists' at the *École des beaux-arts*. It is here, according to Lorenz Eitner, that the morally feeble were conscripted to perpetuate an exhausted tradition, while true creativity flourished under the harsher tuition of independent exploration:

It seduced the weak with school triumphs and popular successes, and destroyed them in the end, while it identified, repelled, and strengthened the vigorous by forcing them to struggle with reality and find their own way.²⁷

The terminology here is familiar enough, as are the assumptions shaping the contrast which Eitner makes. In line with the protocols of modernist discourse, Eitner distinguishes between conformity and liberty, repetitive routine and unconstrained experimentation, cowed obedience to bankrupt authority and authentic self-realisation in the pursuit of true art. While the independent painter 'struggles with reality', drawing moral strength and imaginative insight from a questioning of tradition, the 'trials and ordeals' of academic training merely exacerbate the personal and professional deficiencies inherent in its natural constituency.

While modernism's story of art glorifies individual innovation, revisionism values the continuity and respect for the past guaranteed by the institution. Within this alternative narrative, the *École des beaux-arts* incorporates on a collective level the dispersed moral qualities of the great academics. The sense of disciplined commitment identified in figures such as Bouguereau and Gérôme here provides the ethical foundations for a system described by Jacques Thuillier as maintaining 'the standards of an art which presupposed work and sacrifice . . . which, after a century and a half has not



Fig. 5. Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret: *Le Pain bénit*. 1886. Present location unknown.

lost any of its dignity'.²⁸ This panegyric of the *École* as a 'lesson in nobility' points to the equation between probity and tradition which underscores much revisionist discourse. Rather than being condemned as evidence of prosaic conservatism, respect for the past is revalorised as an index of integrity in sharp distinction to the more factitious values associated with spontaneous inspiration. In a recent article on the painter Charles Landelle, for example, Jacques Foucart endorses the artist's concern with inherited values and contrasts this with the rootlessness of contemporary art practice:

We can see that for Landelle what is at stake in art, in terms of the continuing value of elevated subject matter and regard for formal and conceptual concerns, is much broader and more ambitious than the ideals of spontaneity of execution and the primacy of the study and sketch over the finished work repeatedly advanced by modern tricksters [les trompeurs modernes].²⁹

This anti-modernism is shared by a number of leading advocates of the revisionist cause. While Thérèse Burollet has dismissed 'the impoverished, hastily made works of today',³⁰ Jacques Thuillier has adopted a similar stance, promoting the *École des beaux-arts*' regard for tradition through an attack on 'today's esthetic, which upholds the deliberate

display of any and all of the young artist's urges and which are more often than not results in insignificance or vulgarity'.³¹ Gerald Ackerman's advocacy of Gérôme also betrays a guarded impatience with the modernist canon, expressed in a series of dismissive swipes at Impressionism, an artistic tendency he has described as 'a sub-current of Realism, an important movement which produced a respectable body of work (and a dreary and interminable succession of imitators)'.³² Gérôme's notorious opposition to the Indépendants is surreptitiously exonerated with such modernist heresies as the claim that '[Gérôme] could easily be forgiven his dislike of Manet's paintings; he thought them murky in colour' or 'It may be a relief to some readers who find Monet's Rouen cathedral series inexplicably and irrevocably dull, to know that Gérôme felt the same way too'.³³

Revisionism has attempted to turn the standard contrast between academicism and the avant-garde — normally used to denigrate establishment aesthetics — to its own advantage. Truisms are turned on their heads to challenge the modernists' monopoly of virtue and show avant-garde groups in a light normally reserved for their opponents. Thuillier, for example, has deflected the standard equation between academicism and political conservatism against the Impressionists, whom he accuses of pandering to bourgeois taste through their concentration on anodyne subject matter and their reactionary 'refusal to call into question the human condition or the basic harmony between man and the world around him'.³⁴ Ackerman has developed this notion of conservatism in a rather different direction, through the deployment of 'Academic Realism' as a stylistic category in Second Empire art.³⁵ Under the leadership of Gérôme, he argues, a number of artists — including Manet and Degas — mounted a rear-guard action to save history painting, an initiative which each in turn abandoned for genre. Not only does such a realignment allow Ackerman to identify an archetypal academic, who is often presented as a leading villain in the received narrative of Impressionism, with the interests of his ostensible opponents, it also provides an opportunity to brand Manet as a conservative for his reluctance to assimilate the more radical consequences of the realistic aesthetic. Taken in conjunction with his description of Gérôme's appointment to the teaching staff of the Ecole des beaux-arts in 1864 as 'rather daring, actually avant-garde',³⁶ the tables are neatly turned. The old manichean division is ruptured, but one suspects that an equally rhetorical, if rather more discreet, dichotomy has been instituted in its place. Such suspicions are not allayed by the emphasis which is accorded to Gérôme's unpopularity, both in his own day and since his death. On the one hand, Ackerman informs us that 'Gérôme was never a critical success ... his contribution to each Salon was greeted by bad reviews', while on the other, we are

told that even today 'Critics still heap abuse on him'.³⁷ Again, all of this may well be true, though little enough corroborative evidence is provided. What is significant, though, is the way in which each of the elements constituting a revisionist Gérôme so uncannily shadows the contours of a modernist discourse.

A similar inversion is apparent if we examine revisionist challenges to the claim that academicism provided an uncultivated and vacuous public with an imagery that was as intellectually vapid as it was morally suspect. Anti-revisionist identification of Salon painting with a particular social constituency has sought to equate a reductive emphasis on narrative intelligibility with the demands of an audience fundamentally indifferent to the plastic qualities of the work of art. Paint here is seen as having served as little more than a means to an end. As medium is sacrificed to message, so the artist subordinates the integrity of his materials in the interests of 'story-telling'.³⁸ Indulging public susceptibility to the sentimental and the lurid, he systematically eliminates all formal and cultural obstacles to unreflective understanding, striving for what Zerner and Rosen have described as 'the complete penetrability of the painting'.³⁹ Such a formula, with its insistence on mindless gratification, serves within anti-revisionist discourse to dismiss Salon art as a hollow sham, appealing to the 'uninstructed masses', an 'ignorant audience' of vulgar and uncultivated 'parvenus'.⁴⁰ This is the bourgeoisie as Mme Verdurin, impervious to the more 'aristocratic' art of a figure such as Manet whose work, like that of the Impressionists, could find favour only amongst 'a very limited clientèle, a sophisticated and modern-minded public'.⁴¹

The challenge posed by this contemptuous verdict on Salon art as blandly populist and intellectually arid has not simply been taken up by revisionist historians, it has been turned to their own advantage. Thus, Thérèse Burrollet has claimed that, for all their visual charm, it is the Impressionists who fall short of the academics in their appeal to the mind. Echoing Jacques Foucart's notion of 'l'idée-forme',⁴² she insists that it is to the Salon that we must turn to discover works which engage both the eye and the mind:

The great power of *pompier* art ... derives ... from the importance it accords to thought — to artistic thought, to be sure, applied to the conception of the work, but also to reflections on culture, to lessons from history, and to the affirmation of patriotic, political and religious convictions — indeed, to the expression of any social or civic idea.⁴³

Again, the battle has been taken to the modernists' camp; the guns have been confiscated from the enemy and turned against them. It is striking, however, that Burrollet's defence contains terms conspicuous by their absence from most modernist accounts. For her, and for some of her revisionist

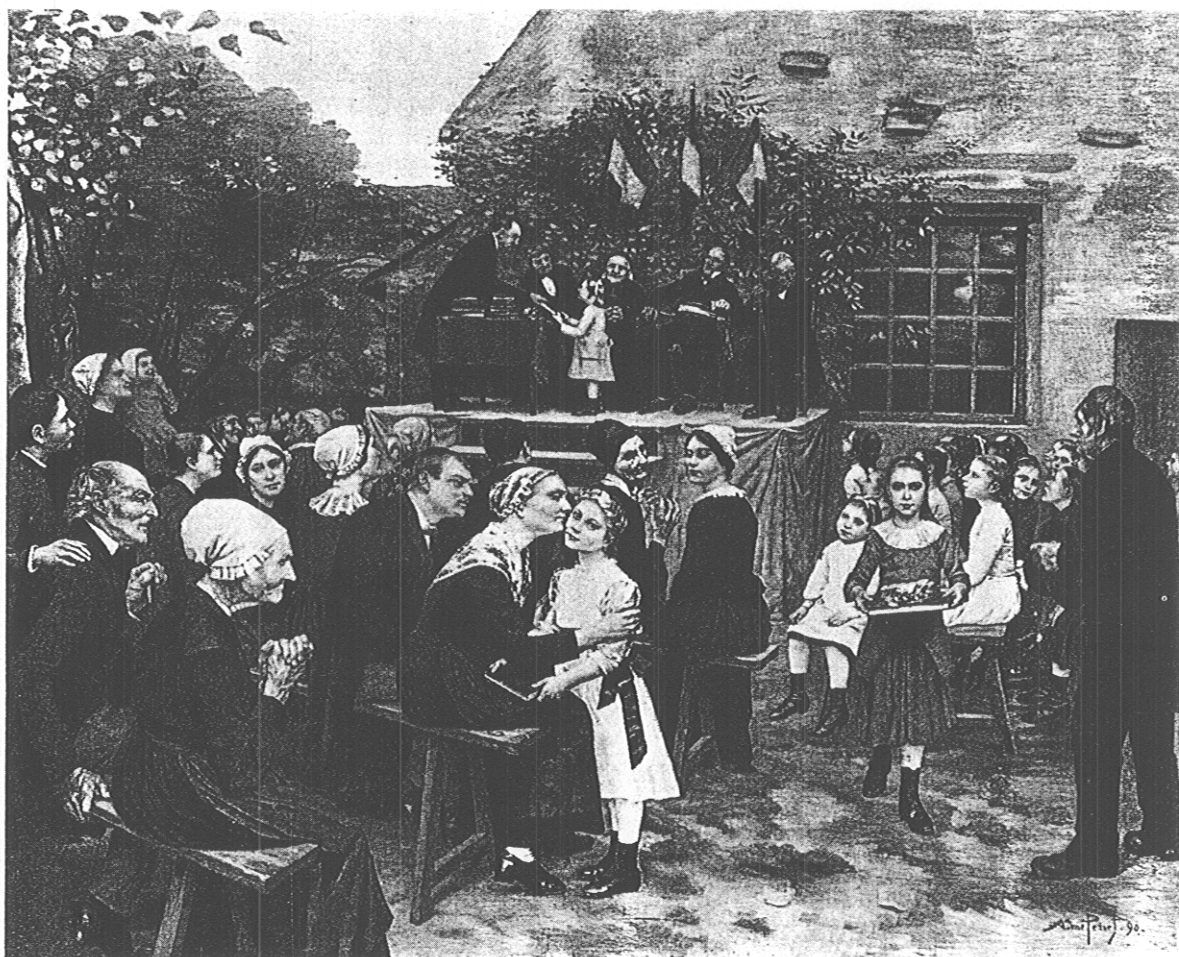


Fig. 6. Aimé Perret: *Distribution des prix*. Salon of 1890. Present location unknown.

allies, academicism's appeal is not to be divorced from the conceptual and ideological repertoire on which it drew. While the patriotic rhetoric of the 'grandes machines' has served only to discredit them further in the eyes of their detractors, for Burolet their resonance as a public statement of a dominant ideology actually enhances their appeal. The rehabilitation of a particular artistic current shades into a different form of recuperation — one which identifies with the value system subtending that art, the value system apparently inscribed within it.

This ideological rehabilitation inflects assessments of academicism in a number of distinct, though often inter-related ways. We are told, for example, by historians such as Thuillier and Burolet that it is the academics rather than the avant-garde who were the truly socially committed artists of the nineteenth century. For Burolet, this amounts to the fact that 'they painted with reverence the labour of the earth, the work of the factory, the courageousness of a strike, the ignominy of poverty, the virtue of charity'.⁴⁴ This is presented as bald fact; its implications — what such a statement might mean, what meanings such works might have had,

what relationship they might have sustained with other areas of social and symbolic power — all of these remain in suspension for reasons which will, I hope, become clear later on. What matters to Burolet is that these works mattered, that they spoke to a public in a way in which the Impressionists never did. And if they *did* preserve a certain reticence on particular matters then an escape clause can be found, however contrived. Here, for example, is Mark Steven Walker coming to Bouguereau's rescue:

Although some [critics] have loudly lamented the overromanticised image of the French peasant presented by the painter, few of them have bothered to contemplate the heroic attention required to sustain such a vision of perfection in a less than perfect age.⁴⁵

This vision of Bouguereau as an artist dedicated to the celebration of 'classical culture, domestic happiness, hope, and Christian faith' in works which 'reverberate with plangent sentiment' has been evoked by Gilles Chazal.⁴⁶ No mention of eroticism here, as if *Les Oréades* or *Nymphs playing with a Satyr*



Fig. 7. Jean-Léon Gérôme: *Le Poète touché par la muse*. 1885. Salon of 1888. Work lost.

were in their own way merely contributing to the promotion of domestic happiness. No mention either of the market which, as Louise d'Argencourt has convincingly shown, played no small part in shaping Bouguereau's repertoire, particularly after 1863. Puncturing the myth of the disinterested idealist, she rather spoils the game, maintaining that 'all the subjects, whether edifying or touching, essentially responded to the demands of a group of foreign buyers'.⁴⁷

Revisionism, though, seems reluctant to take on board such claims when more congenial hypotheses are available. Jacques Thuillier, for example, has on more than one occasion insisted on the open and meritocratic structure of the Ecole des beaux-arts, citing as an example the progression of Paul Baudry, a cobbler's son from the Vendée whose subsequent celebrity owed much to his time at the rue Bonaparte and the Villa Medici. The state's nurturing of talent from so humble a background stands for Thuillier as eloquent testimony both of the July Monarchy's enlightened cultivation of the arts and the admirable openness of its institutions. Surveying the artist's encounter with the Ecole, he opines:

There are doubtless many virtues here: a state mindful of true democracy, an artist dominated by his sense of vocation . . . These civic virtues are little enough appreciated today. But they provide us with a great example to think about.⁴⁸

It is only with an almost wilful selective myopia that the July Monarchy can be eulogised for its

democratic impulses, which it managed to contain all too effectively when it came to more immediately important areas of political power. Yet for those revisionists anxious to rehabilitate artists who spent much of their careers working for the state, it is important to present the state itself in a favourable light. Hence we find Gerald Ackerman commenting approvingly on 'the ingenuity and generosity of successive French governments in finding profitable tasks for artists'.⁴⁹ Are we to assume, both here and in Thuillier's defence of the Ecole des beaux-arts, that this official commitment to the arts was prompted merely by an open-handed benevolence? Again, the question isn't asked, but its discreet absence suggests its own response.

Perhaps the most sustained ideological defence of academicism has been provided by Thérèse Burolet, who has identified a moral parallax between contemporary attitudes and those of the late nineteenth century as central to current resistance to Salon art of the period. 'An order established on the systematic exaltation of moral values and money repels us,' she writes in her essay, 'Antidisestablishmentarianism':

We are irritated by jingoistic patriotism, capitalist paternalism and mawkish, unconscious or hypocritical sentimentality that delights in popular imagery and tearful melodrama. Furthermore, our eroticism makes fun of false modesty, lowered eyelids and unlaced corsets. Yet . . . we ought to have enough perspective to comprehend the sincere aspirations of that society towards its ideals of patriotism, civic and moral stability, social and scientific

progress. They were the forces behind a régime that initiated numerous reforms and fought heroically in the First World War. But we have put everything in question. Patriotism, citizenship, work, religion no longer 'pay' . . . This prevents us from judging fairly the artistic manifestations which are the reflection of the 'Belle Epoque'.⁵⁰

While acknowledging certain flaws in Third Republic society, Burollet none the less extols the art of the period as the expression of a world more firmly grounded in moral rectitude than our own. The dissipation of this inherently admirable and well intentioned ethical code has stripped us of the innocence these works demand for sympathetic appreciation. Our cynicism, in a sense, is seen as making us unworthy of this art, isolating us from it as we are isolated from the high moral principles that nurtured its appearance. To rediscover the nineteenth century, we first need to reaffirm the virtues which sustained it, virtues which Burollet suspects — and perhaps hopes — could prove more resilient than their current eclipse might suggest.⁵¹ The conservatism underlying such a position is clear enough. Academicism is conscripted into a struggle to rehabilitate an ideology grounded in the 'traditional' values of social organicism, where devotion to

family, church and state counters the moral dispersion apparently inflicting the modern world. Almost without warning, 'tradition' takes on a broader, more politically loaded resonance; no longer merely an index of cultural probity against which to measure the aesthetic worth of a dissenting avant-garde, it stands as an affirmation of a more public acquiescence to the authority of received beliefs and a buttress against dissent in the arena of social life.

Critics of revisionism have largely overlooked the more extreme implications of this reassertion of tradition. Though Zerner and Rosen's attachment to aesthetic individualism has led them to denigrate the movement by promiscuously comparing the cultural politics of Second Empire France with Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia,⁵² for them as for others the main priority has been to assert the moral and pictorial inferiority of academic practice. In pursuing such an attack, anti-revisionists have displayed a persistent ambiguity in their readiness to accommodate a more inclusive historical account of nineteenth-century cultural life. While Rewald has endorsed 'the admirable aim of presenting a total picture of the artistic achievements' of the period,⁵³ and Zerner and Rosen have stressed the importance of the study of official art,⁵⁴ all impose strict limitations on such an enterprise. Their profound scepticism over academicism's pictorial merits, together with a visceral distaste for its cultural connotations, clearly suggest that any modification to received narratives must remain strictly limited. Rewald's highly qualified welcome for an extended canon hinges on a narrowly restrictive notion of 'achievement' which happily maintains an embargo on 'barren Academicians' and counsels instead the study of 'those who contributed to the chain of crests whose peaks are still great, luminous and alive'.⁵⁵ Zerner and Rosen's more thoughtful assessment of current perceptions of the nineteenth century hedges calls for a re-evaluation of modernist aesthetics with a series of contradictory strictures on revisionism which effectively trap its exponents in a methodological double-bind. Dismissing as illusory certain historians' defence of rehabilitation in the name of objectivity,⁵⁶ they simultaneously decry championship of academicism as muddle-headed or evidence of a weakness for *kitsch*,⁵⁷ while remarking on the 'lack of enthusiasm shown by the most distinguished art historians for their favourite *pompier*s'.⁵⁸ Given the vigour with which critics such as Rewald and Cooper have attacked quite the opposite failing,⁵⁹ this seems a particularly curious observation, and one scarcely borne out by the adulatory tone of much revisionist writing. Here, for example, is Jacques Foucart's far from tepid evaluation of Gérôme:

Who today can possibly regard Gérôme's work as anything but well painted, marvellously composed and perfectly drawn? Who in good faith could deny his real and profound vocation as an artist? Who could suppose



Fig. 8. Théobald Chartran: *Vincent de Beauvais et Louis IX à l'Abbaye de Royaumont*. Salon of 1888. Present location unknown.

that such an artist could not be a seeker after the truth and a creative inventor?⁶⁰

Nor has Gerald Ackerman, Gérôme's recent biographer, been any more lukewarm, variously comparing the artist to Vermeer, Rubens, Chardin, Delacroix, Renoir, Picasso and Matisse.⁶¹ The invocation of such canonical names amounts to rather more than an innocent game of visual Snap; it is through such means that previously despised figures are insinuated into the artistic Pantheon, their credentials for serious consideration discreetly pressed home.⁶²

For in the end, much revisionism amounts to little more than this — the rehabilitation of an outsider according to the judgmental criteria of the dominant discourse. Not, perhaps, in terms of the easy-going 'cohabitation' which several commentators have read into the mix of works attempted at the Musée d'Orsay⁶³ — a mix which, even in this relatively dilute form, has proved too strong for many to stomach.⁶⁴ Rather than acting as junior members in a coalition still dominated by the familiar power-brokers of modernism, revisionist historians generally nurture more far-reaching ambitions on their

candidates' behalf. Yet if they dream of reining in the power of an oligarchy which has remained virtually unchallenged for over half a century, the key word in their manifesto remains the same — quality. The term may carry different connotations depending on the historian doing the canvassing — integrity, hard work, tradition, citizenship, religion, patriotism — but quality remains the central plank on which the campaign is fought. It is as advocates of a form of art rather than a form of history that many of the leading revisionists lodge their claim for art-historical recognition.

Emphasis on the primacy of quality — on formal evaluation as the touchstone of a reformed vision of the nineteenth century — infiltrates revisionist perceptions of history as profoundly as within the discourse it seeks to challenge. The open insistence of figures such as Cooper and Rewald on the decisive role of critical discrimination in mapping out viable areas of study takes as self-evident the historian's obligation to select from the field of cultural production on the basis of quality. Such a methodology acknowledges as worthy of investigation only those forms of art considered to be innovative and genuinely inspired. 'Lesser' works can be safely



Fig. 9. William-Adolphe Bouguereau: *Offrande à l'Amour*. Salon of 1893. Present location unknown.

ignored or treated exclusively as a visual *repoussoir* to the avant-garde. Such priorities sustain an essentially internalised conception of history, a history of artists isolated from the society in which they operate and a history of painting approached primarily as a study of form. The more inclusive ambitions of revisionism might suggest a questioning of these assumptions, an opening up of enquiry methodologically as well as quantitatively to investigate the full range of historical forces shaping the imagery of the period. Despite certain achievements in this direction, some of the most prominent revisionists remain committed to protocols and priorities virtually identical to their adversaries'; the central thrust of their research has been monographic, its guiding principle the reinstatement of academicism as an acceptable artistic style. Within such an agenda, more broadly based historical enquiry has not simply been overlooked, it has been explicitly condemned as both diversionary and damaging. The case is stated most openly by Thérèse Burollet:

For many years now a kind of art history inspired by sociological considerations has gone about the study of *pompier* art. In the interests of reaffirming strictly historical theories, the study treats each painting as a sociological or archeological artifact, and ignores that a painting is above all a pictorial adventure. To accept such a vision of things is to perpetuate a ghettoized view of art.⁶⁵

Assiduously avoiding such ghettoisation, Burollet concentrates her efforts on more vital issues, such as comparing the 'trowelled impastoing' of Ribot and Roll to Courbet's technique, and the 'oily, at once nervous touch' of Carolus-Duran and Gervex with the style of Manet.⁶⁶

A more nuanced position has been proposed by Jacques Thuillier, though one which nevertheless subordinates historical analysis to the discrimination of pictorial quality. On one level, Thuillier endorses consideration of the visual arts as an integral element of socio-cultural production:

It is impossible to study the great currents within the novel, poetry, history, politics and even religion while refusing to pay any attention to the painters and sculptors who, from similar ideals, were able to evolve plastic forms which were equally complex, poetic, and capable of embodying the aspirations of their time.

Thuillier, however, qualifies his remarks by condemning what he describes as a 'false erudition which rejects hierarchies from a sociological point of view and treats art as if it were simply a "product"'.⁶⁷ The specific object of his strictures — Aleksa Čelebonović's *The Heyday of Salon Painting. Masterpieces of Bourgeois Realism* — is vulnerable enough; as he points out, such an apparently historical study merely indulges in the equivocal pleasure of celebrating academic *kitsch*. Yet a curious paradox underpins Thuillier's perception of history. While many

art historians have been willing to concede some limited value to studying 'secondary' artists for the historical insights offered by their more circumscribed and socially accommodating vision,⁶⁸ Thuillier reverses the equation. For him, it is the great *pompiers* who speak most eloquently of their age; lesser lights, unworthy of aesthetic rehabilitation on any level, are irredeemably ridiculous and compromise viable analysis of any sort. As a consequence, Thuillier asserts, the task of the future will be that of 'establishing a strict hierarchy of merit' in which worthy academic canvases can claim their rightful place within the more familiar modernist canon.⁶⁹

Both Thuillier and Burollet draw the same distinction between what they regard as the legitimate territory of 'art history' and the unacceptable incursion of what they describe as 'sociology'. The former domain, with which they unambiguously identify, seems virtually indistinguishable in its concerns from the discipline described by Rewald and Cooper. Only its object of study is different. 'Sociology' apparently defines a methodological address which diverts attention away from the object as a discrete field of enquiry — a 'pictorial adventure' — towards a concern with painting as a specific form of historical evidence — 'a social or archeological artifact'. Such remarks imply that painting is not a social artifact or is only secondarily so, that this is neither an important aspect of it nor one of direct consequence to the 'art historian'. Yet, as we have already seen, neither Thuillier nor Burollet entirely abstain from drawing 'historical' lessons from academicism and its institutions — the former in his observations on the 'truly democratic' impulses of the July Monarchy, the latter in her eulogy of the moral rectitude of the Third Republic. In both instances, historical generalisation presents an ethical symbiosis between a particular régime and a particular conjuncture in the academic tradition. In neither instance would serious historical investigation corroborate the claims being made. Both régimes are seen through a highly tendentious distorting lens, which abstracts out all historical complexity, erases any hint of social conflict, eradicates all ideological tension to secure a perfect harmony of virtue between politics and painting. To do anything other, we might suspect, to raise more searching questions demanding a less accommodating vision of the past, would be regarded as violating the pictorial integrity of a form of art resurrected in a haze of moral approbation.

The point has been well made by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, commenting on Thuillier's rehabilitation of the Ecole des beaux-arts:

Even though it has the merit of attributing a *raison d'être* rather than condemning out of hand, adopting a 'sympathetic' viewpoint, though appropriate in the *defence* of an institution, is no more valid as a means of *understanding* than a hostile or polemical perspective: the unanalysed

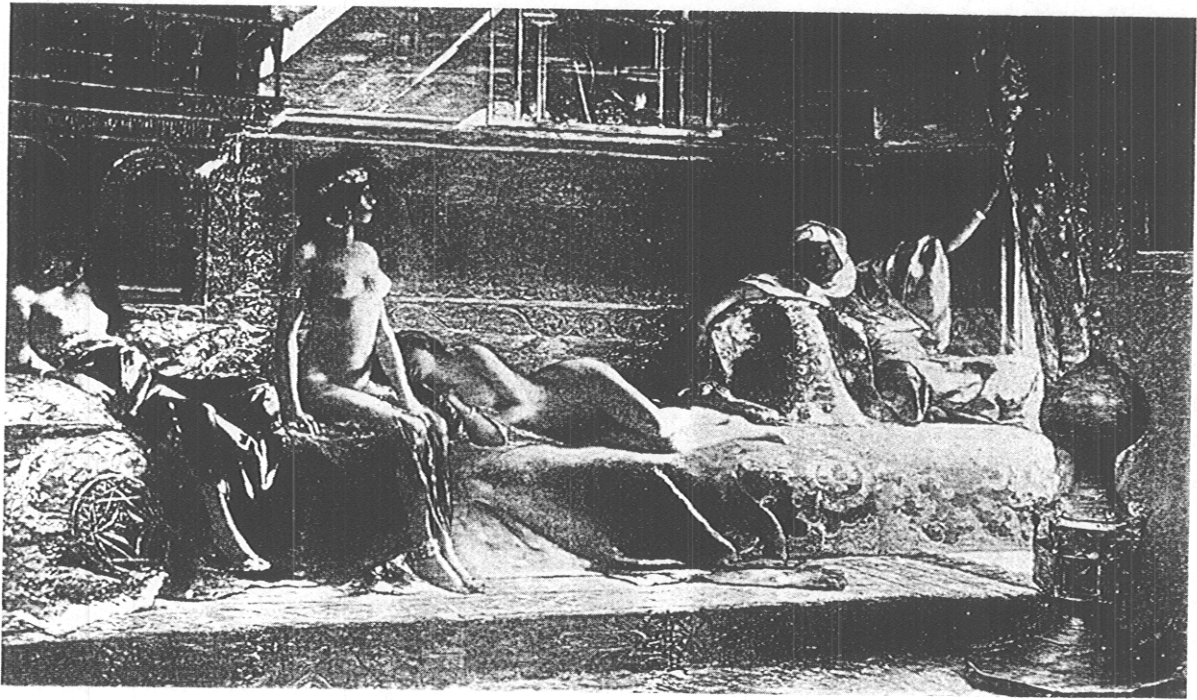


Fig. 10. Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant: *Les Chérifas*. Salon of 1884. Musée des beaux-arts, Carcassonne.

relationship to the object under analysis (in other words, the identification between the analyst and his object, the academic master) lies at the heart of an essentially anachronistic understanding of this object which risks holding on only to those aspects of an institution directly opposed to the representation which is being challenged, . . . while failing to grasp those which would allow us to understand the true social genesis of these works of art.⁷⁰

Bourdieu's distinction between 'defence' and 'understanding' highlights a characteristic strategy of revisionism, whose pronounced historical ambition of presenting a more adequate and inclusive analysis of the nineteenth century is frequently restricted by a more typically art-historical reflex of promoting a particular artist or pictorial idiom. As a perceived threat to this promotional exercise, introducing potentially awkward questions which detract from uncontaminated admiration, history is repulsed as a harmful digression. Yet, as one of the most distinguished art historians of the period, Léon Rosenthal, remarked over seventy years ago in the introduction to his classic study *Du romantisme au réalisme*:

The admiration we feel for works of art will not be diminished if, instead of examining them in the light of exclusively aesthetic preoccupations, we attempt to trace the complex forces which determined them . . .⁷¹

Such a study, implying a properly integrated historical analysis, rather than the insistent formalism of the modernist or revisionism's clumsy ambivalence, holds out the possibility of simultaneously

enhancing understanding of nineteenth-century artistic production and of making a valid contribution to clarifying broader social and cultural questions posed by the period. Valuable contributions have, indeed, already been made in this direction, largely by historians who have avoided the heated polemics of academicism's more committed champions. The fundamental importance of the state and its institutions to an understanding of the mechanics of artistic training and production has been clarified in a remarkable series of exhibitions and publications by Philippe Grunhech, whose painstaking documentation and reconstruction of the all-important competition for the Prix de Rome provides an invaluable basis for future research.⁷² This micro-history, essential if 'understanding' in Bourdieu's sense of the term is to succeed the more limited *parti-pris* of the period's apologists, has been complemented and extended by a number of more wide-ranging investigations. Pierre Vaisse, in particular, who has examined the revisionist phenomenon with considerable lucidity,⁷³ has done much to demolish the simplistic, if dramatically satisfying, myth of an obdurate and self-seeking establishment systematically sabotaging the artistic aspirations of a persecuted avant-garde.⁷⁴ The detailed investigation of official institutions and their cultural impact, to which Vaisse has made such an important contribution, has been further developed by Marie-Claude Genet-Delacroix, whose major studies — perhaps significantly published outside normal art-historical circuits — confront and reinterpret received notions of 'official' art under the Third Republic and its relationship with the Academy and the market place.⁷⁵

58. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
59. See also Eitner, *supra* note 10, p. 286: 'A number of the main *pompier*s . . . have received adulatory treatment from scholars who would rank them among the great masters of the nineteenth century, for reasons which they do not clearly articulate.'
60. Foucart in *supra* note 16, p. 7.
61. *Ibid.*, pp. 110, 120, 147. On Gérôme's thematic affinities, see also Gerald M. Ackerman, 'Gérôme's Oriental Paintings and the Western Genre Tradition', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 60, no. 7, March 1986, pp. 76–80.
62. See, most recently, Bruno Foucard [sic], 'Elie Delaunay, un éclecticisme âpre' in *Jules-Elie Delaunay 1828–1891*, Musée des beaux-arts, Nantes; Musée Hébert, Paris, September 1988–March 1989, 'son David est beau comme un Donatello' (p. 16, reference to the *David triomphant*, first exhibited in 1874) and Bruno Foucart, 'Legros ou le réalisme inspiré' in *Alphonse Legros 1837–1911*, Musée des beaux-arts, Dijon, December 1987–February 1988, 'Comment déjà ne pas penser à Gauguin . . .?', p. 26.
63. See Patricia Mainardi, 'Postmodern History at the Musée d'Orsay', *October*, no. 41, Summer 1987, pp. 30–52.
64. See, for example, remarks by the painter Pierre Soulages, 'La Création entre parenthèses' in the article 'La Guerre d'Orsay aura-t-elle lieu?', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 16–22 January 1987, p. 98.
65. Burolet. *supra* note 17, p. 36.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 37. 'They [the *Pompier*s] understood brilliantly how to dispose planes, balance colour masses, make light circulate. The quality of their rendering of skin, fabric, and fur is often dazzling; and certain still lifes within larger compositions occasionally deserve to be studied for their own sake. And while on the subject, is there indeed such a great gulf between the bouquet of flowers in Friant's *All Saints' Day* and the one in Manet's *Olympia*? And doesn't the bloodstain in Regnault's *Execution without Judgement* attain the tactile intensity of the poured milk in Fragonard's *Perrette*?'
67. Thuillier. *supra* note 17, pp. 57–58, 60.
68. Thus Eitner claims (p. 272): 'There can be no doubt that the Salon painters reflected the mentality of their society and period, including all its vulgarities and falsehoods, more closely than the independent painters, since they were less distracted by problems purely of art. There is considerable irony in the fact that recent critics have tried to interpret the highly original, aristocratic art of Manet as a document of the bourgeois era, when the authentic expression of bourgeois mass culture is abundantly available in populist Salon painting, undiluted by artistic irrelevancies.'
69. Thuillier. *supra* note 17, p. 60.
70. Pierre Bourdieu, 'L'Institutionnalisation de l'anomie', *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, nos. 19–20, June 1987, p. 8. The original text reads as follows:

Même s'il a le mérite d'accorder une *raison d'être*, au lieu de condamner sans examen, le point de vue 'compréhensif', qui convient lorsqu'il s'agit de *défenir* une institution, ne vaut pas mieux, lorsqu'il s'agit de *comprendre*, que le regard hostile ou polémique: le rapport non analysé à l'objet d'analyse (je veux parler de l'homologie de position entre l'analysant et l'analysé, le maître académique) est au principe d'une compréhension essentiellement anachronique de cet objet qui a toutes les chances de ne retenir que les caractéristiques de l'institution les plus directement opposées à la représentation recusée, . . . et de laisser échapper au contraire toutes celles qui permettraient de comprendre les œuvres dans la vérité de leur genèse sociale.

71. Leon Rosenthal, 'Introduction', *Du romantisme au réalisme, La Peinture en France de 1830 à 1848*, Paris, 1914 (reprint Paris, 1987), p. XXVII.
72. See Philippe Grunhech, *Le Grand Prix de peinture. Les Concours des Prix de Rome de 1797 à 1863*, Paris, 1983, the catalogues for the exhibitions *Les Concours des Prix de Rome*, Ecole des beaux-arts, 1986. and *supra* note 28.
73. Pierre Vaisse, 'Les Raisons d'un retour', *Le Débat*, no. 10, March 1981, pp. 10–28.
74. See, for example, Vaisse's discussion of the particularly sensitive question of official attitudes towards the Caillebotte bequest, 'Le Legs Caillebotte, d'après les documents historiques', *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de l'art français*, 1985 (1983), pp. 201–08.
75. See Marie-Claude Genet-Delacroix, 'Esthétique officielle et art national sous la Troisième République', *Mouvement social*, no. 131, 1985, pp. 105–20; Marie-Claude Genet-Delacroix, 'Vies d'artistes: art académique, art officiel et art libre en France à la fin du XIXe siècle', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, vol. 33, January–March 1986, pp. 40–73.
76. *De David à Delacroix: la peinture française de 1774 à 1830*, Grand Palais, Paris, November 1974–February 1975.
77. *Le Musée du Luxembourg en 1874*, Grand Palais, Paris, May–November 1974, catalogue by Geneviève Lacambre and Jacqueline de Rohan-Chabot; *supra* note 51.
78. *La Sculpture française au XIXe siècle*, Grand Palais, Paris, April–July 1986.
79. See particularly Anne Middleton Wagner, *Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux Sculptor of the Second Empire*, New Haven and London, 1986, and Catherine Chevillot's catalogue for the exhibition *Emmanuel Frémiet, La Main et la multiple*, Musée des beaux-arts, Dijon and Musée de Grenoble, November 1988–April 1989.
80. See in particular Maurice Agulhon's essays on sculpture relating to urban decor and 'statuomanie', first published in *Ethnologie française* and recently reissued in the collection of essays *Histoire vagabonde*, Paris, 1988.
81. Kirk Varnedoe, 'Revisionism Revisited', *Art Journal*, Fall–Winter 1980, 348–52.