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Salon Critics and the Call for a New Art in France

According to one eighteenth-century French official, academy exhibitions rendered a "sort of accounting" to the public of the academy's work. In the exhibitions, contemporary art was submitted to public scrutiny, leading, before long, to written critiques that were published in pamphlets and periodicals. From the mid-eighteenth cen-

tury onward, art criticism became a widely read and appreciated form of journalism. Critics were the middlemen between artists and public. As taste makers, they were both influential and powerful, since they could make or break artists' careers.

In 1747 a self-styled critic by the name of La Font de Saint-Yenne (1711–1769) published a lengthy pamphlet that is often seen as the first example of modern art criticism. Entitled *Réflexions sur quelques causes de l'état présent de la peinture en France* (Reflections on Some Causes of the Current State of Painting in France), it contains a lengthy review of the Salon of 1746, in which the critic laments the decadence of contemporary art. La Font's pamphlet enraged academic artists, who were not used to having their work so scrutinized. He was ridiculed, both in writing and in caricatures. In a print (FIG. 1-20) by Claude-Henri Watelet (1718–1786) he is portrayed as a blind man, complete with dog and cane—the ultimate offense to a critic of visual art. The attacks on La Font were so virulent that he felt compelled to defend himself in an open letter, published that same year. "It is only in the mouth of those firm and equitable men who compose the Public, [and] who have no links whatever with the artists, . . . that we can find the language of truth," he wrote. Thus he expressed the powerful idea that public exhibitions and impartial criticism would counterbalance the degeneration of art caused by artists' elitism and self-satisfaction.

1-20 **Claude-Henri Watelet,** *Caricature of La Font de Saint-Yenne.* Etching after a drawing by Portien. Bibliothèque Nationale, Département des Estampes et de la Photographie, Paris.

To counter what he perceived as the decadence of art, La Font advocated that painters should abandon the frivolous, erotic subjects of Rococo painting for more noble themes. He suggested that they tone down their lively, asymmetrical compositions, sensuous colors, and virtuoso brushwork. La Font cited as examples the works of several sixteenth- and seventeenth-century artists who had found inspiration in Classical Greek and Roman art. He also proposed the foundation of a public museum where young artists could study, admire, and learn from the great masters of the Renaissance and the Baroque. This was a novel idea at the time, since most significant artworks of the past were in royal and aristocratic collections, which were generally inaccessible to the public.

La Font's infamous review of the Salon of 1746 was followed by a flood of Salon critiques and other writings on contemporary art. Many of them repeated the call for a new art that was to be noble, edifying, and imbued with sentiment. This idea was expressed most eloquently by Denis Diderot, one of the editors of the *Encyclopédie*, who was also an insightful art critic. Between 1759 and 1771 Diderot regularly reviewed the Salons, and in so doing developed a blueprint for the direction into which eighteenth-century art should be moving. Diderot condemned Rococo decorative painting and lashed out against the work of Boucher, whose example he found ruinous for young painters. He criticized Boucher's pastoral scenes, "all dolled up with sheep and shepherds," as well as his mythological love scenes, with their excesses of sensuality and nudity. Such works, to Diderot, could only issue from a depraved mind, the "imagination of a man who passes his life with the lowest-class prostitutes." (Ironically, Diderot's sharpest criticism against Boucher coincided with the artist's greatest public success, his appointment as First Painter to the King in 1765 and his appointment as director of the Academy in 1767.)

Diderot much preferred the work of Jean-Baptiste Chardin (see FIG. 1.16), since for him Chardin painted "nature and truth." He also praised the sentimental and edifying themes of Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805), who was by far his favorite artist. Greuze's *Filial Piety*, also known as *The Paralytic* (FIG. 1-21), shown at the Salon of 1763, drew his unconditional admiration: "this painting is lovely and very beautiful." *Filial Piety* shows an old man, paralyzed by a stroke, surrounded by his caring family. Diderot admired the way in which Greuze's figures demonstrate their love for the old man. The blanket

1-21 **Jean-Baptiste Greuze,** *Filial Piety (The Paralytic)*, 1763. Oil on canvas, 43 x 57" (1.15 x 1.46 m). The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

wrapped around his legs and the freshly washed sheet drying over the banister, to him, were moving evidence of filial care.

Greuze's paintings paralleled Diderot's own efforts to write a new kind of play, the *drame bourgeois* (bourgeois drama), which focused on contemporary middle-class life and its problems. Greuze, in fact, delivered what Diderot advocated: an art that dealt with contemporary realities, that showed genuine sentiment, and that presented virtuous examples.

> Oh, how beneficial would it be for mankind if all the arts of imitation set themselves a common goal and joined hands with the laws to make us love virtue and hate vice! It is up to the philosopher to encourage them to do so; it is up to him to address himself to the poet, the painter, the musician, and to cry out to them in a loud voice: Men of genius, why has heaven endowed you? If he is understood, soon the walls of our palaces will no longer be covered with images of debauch; our voices will no longer be the organs of crime; and taste and social behavior will gain by it.

Count d'Angiviller and the Promotion of Virtuous Art

The mid-eighteenth-century call for a morally uplifting art has often been seen as the reaction of a hardworking middle class against the moral excesses of a bored and debauched aristocracy. Although there is some truth to this assertion, it simplifies a situation that was, in fact, highly nuanced. After all, the moralistic paintings of Chardin and Greuze were collected by aristocratic patrons, including the King, while prints after the "debauched" paintings of Boucher and Fragonard sold well among the middle class. It is worth remembering as well that Madame de Pompadour, the mistress of Louis XV, was the main protector of the *Encyclopédie*, in which many of the new ideas about the social function of art were expounded. By the

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1-22 **Nicolas-Guy Brenet,** *The Death of Du Guesclin*, 1777. Oil on canvas, 10′5″ x 7′4″ (3.17 x 2.24 m). Musée National du Château de Versailles, Versailles.

1-23 **Jean-Antoine Houdon,** *Admiral de Tourville,* 1781. Marble, over life-size. Musée National du Château de Versailles, Versailles.

same token, Diderot, that fierce critic of Rococo decorative painting, had himself portrayed by Fragonard!

Most importantly, the change in the arts that eventually came about was not initiated by the bourgeoisie but was due to several initiatives of the office of the Director-General of Buildings, Gardens, Arts, Academies, and Royal Manufactories of the King. This office was responsible for the Academy and Salon exhibitions, as well as for all royal commissions for buildings, sculptures, and paintings. In the years between 1750 and 1790, it was charged with the creation of a public art museum in the royal Luxembourg Palace in Paris, where, following La Font's advice, artists could study the Old Masters. It also encouraged a revival of history painting through commissions and acquisitions of serious works.

The latter initiative is associated in particular with Count Charles-Claude d'Angiviller (1730–1809), Director-General of Buildings under Louis XVI, who had succeeded his grandfather, Louis XV, in 1774. Shortly after taking office, D'Angiviller wrote a letter to the director of the Academy in which he declared that, from the government's point of view, art's highest purpose was to promote virtue and to combat vice. To achieve this, he proposed to commission historical paintings with a strong moral impact. For the Salon of 1777, he awarded eight painting commissions for scenes from Greco-Roman and French history. It was specified that the paintings treat themes of religious piety, generosity, hard work, heroic resolve, respect for virtue, and respect for morality. A painting by the now forgotten artist Nicolas-Guy Brenet (1728–1792), a one-time student of Boucher, is an example of the works that resulted from D'Angiviller's dictate. Brenet's *The Death of Du Guesclin* (FIG. 1-22) represents a scene from the Hundred Years' War between France and England (1337–1453). The virtuous French constable Du Guesclin died while trying to win back a city occupied by the English. They had promised him that they would surrender if they did not receive help by a certain date. Even though the constable died, they kept their promise. In Brenet's painting the English commander kneels by Du Guesclin's deathbed and lays down the keys of the city. On either side of the bed, friends and fellow soldiers mourn the constable's death. His companion in arms points to Du Guesclin, as if to call attention to his courage and virtue.

Brenet's *The Death of Du Guesclin* presents a radical departure from the lighthearted subjects of Boucher and Fragonard. Not only does it deal with a serious, moralistic theme, but it also shows great respect for historical accuracy. Brenet carefully studied medieval images to render the setting and costume of Du Guesclin's time accurately. Still, he did not turn his back on the Rococo completely. The painting's complex composition, the light colors, and the sensuous, cascading draperies connect it to the art of Boucher and Fragonard. It would take a younger generation of artists to sever the link with the Rococo style completely.

D'Angiviller also tried to redirect eighteenth-century sculpture by commissioning a series of monumental full-length portraits of the "great men of France." These effigies of men of high character were to inspire greater virtue and intellectual achievement in French youth. At the same time, by reminding Frenchmen of their hallowed history, the sculptures were expected to instill pride and patriotism. *Admiral de Tourville* (FIG. 1-23), by Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828), was one of the statues in the series of "great men of France." It represents a well-known admiral from the time of Louis XIV who had won a series of naval battles before falling to the English fleet in the notorious battle of La Hogue (1692). For his courage and determination in that ill-fated battle, De Tourville was made Marshal of France. Like the history paintings commissioned by D'Angiviller, the statues of "great men" are marked by historical authenticity. D'Angiviller had no use for statues that depicted French heroes as nude gods or heroes. Through details of dress and attributes,

1-24 **Sir Joshua Reynolds,** *Portrait of Mrs Siddons as the Tragic Muse*, 1784. Oil on canvas, 94¼" x 58⅛" (239.4 x 147.6 cm). Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California.

1-25 **Thomas Gainsborough,** *Portrait of Mrs. Sarah Siddons,* 1785. Oil on canvas, 49½" × 39" (126 × 99.5 cm). National Gallery, London.

each sculpture is clearly situated in a specific period of French history. That way, the ensemble of sculptures took the viewer through the entire annals of France.

Reynolds and the Call for a New Art in Britain

The call for a more serious, noble, and moral art was also heard in other countries, notably in Britain. Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), the first president of the British Royal Academy, set forth a new philosophy of art in a series of lectures, presented over a period of twenty years, at the openings of the academy exhibitions. In these lectures, published as *Discourses on Art*, Reynolds called for the return to a "grand" or "great" style of painting, based on the art of Michelangelo (1475–1564) and Raphael (1483–1520), who were then considered the two supreme Renaissance masters. Reynolds's definition of "grand style" pertained to both form and subject matter. Formally, art had to be simple, natural, and "beautiful," according to the aesthetic criteria of Classical antiquity. Its subjects had to be noble and edifying, or, to use Reynolds's own terms ("Third Discourse"):

> Beauty and simplicity have so great a share in the composition of a great stile, that he who has acquired himself with them has little else to learn. It must not, indeed, be forgotten that there is a nobleness of conception, which goes beyond any thing in the mere exhibition even of perfect form; there is an art of animating and dignifying the figures with intellectual grandeur, of impressing the appearance of philosophick wisdom, or heroick virtue. This can only be acquired by him that enlarges the sphere of his understanding by a variety of knowledge, and warms his imagination with the best productions of ancient and modern poetry.

Like progressive academicians in France, Reynolds advocated history painting as the highest form of art. Yet he himself painted only a few such works. History painting required a huge investment of time and materials, and painters would embark on it only to make an impression at the academy exhibitions or to execute a commission. In eighteenth-century Britain, however, government commissions were limited and large-scale history paintings were difficult to sell to private patrons. Since there was little incentive for history painting, Reynolds, like most British artists, made his living painting portraits, for which there was always a healthy market. At times, though, he would try to graft his ideas for a grand style of painting on to portraiture. In some portraits, particularly those of women, he dressed his models as Greek goddesses or muses and placed them in a historical context. In others, he transformed his sitters into allegorical figures such as Nature, Poetry, or Tragedy. His *Portrait of Mrs Siddons as the Tragic Muse* (FIG. 1-24) may serve as an example of the grand style in portraiture. The great actress, well known for her tragic roles (she was a favorite as Lady Macbeth), appears here as a muse enthroned between Pity (left) and Terror (right). The composition is directly inspired by one of the prophets in Michelangelo's ceiling painting in the Sistine Chapel in Rome. This is not surprising, since Michelangelo was Reynolds's great hero: a "truly divine man" whom, in his *Discourses*, he recommended as the ultimate model for all artists.

It is instructive to compare Reynolds's "grand manner" portrait of Sarah Siddons with Gainsborough's likeness of the same sitter (FIG. 1-25). Though the two portraits were painted around the same time, they could not be more different. While Gainsborough's painting exemplifies the Rococo style through its virtuoso, sensuous brushwork which so brilliantly evokes the various textures of Siddons's stylish outfit—silk, fur, feather, and lace – Reynolds's work introduces a new emphasis on conception and on intellectual depth.