

## A CASE IN POINT OF ART HISTORICAL PERPLEXITIES

*« Toute l'histoire de l'art est dans l'histoire, les chefs-d'œuvre de l'art seuls sont dans l'esthétique ».*

Raymond BAYER,  
Traité d'Esthétique

Prometheus stole fire for mankind. The musical scales, dances, various techniques were gifts of the gods. The discussion of the Promethean theme, the attribution of the most precious inventions to the immortals, would be beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it, therefore, to say that this attitude persists under various guises all through the ages. Whether it be an efficient tool or exquisite means causing delight, men can see their perfect model only in celestial spheres far from this shadowy existence of imperfection. Platonic ideas, formal logic or beauty conceived with Kantian rigour, can be seen only in their eternal purity and autonomy, far from earthly defects, while the first clumsy tools that lit fire at man's will and the hollow bone into which he blew by accident and discovered the instrument are forgotten. But the Greek could borrow fire from his neighbour, and the world he was born into already had sophisticated instruments and scales. However that may have been, man cannot admit that in the beginning was the imperfect, and that after all the perfect is but a fiction. So he derives everything from the perfect which, strangely enough, begets the imperfect that can never fit into the mould of perfection. Hence the permanent and inevitable difficulties in all fields that lend themselves to normativeness, prescriptiveness as well as descriptiveness, which is nevertheless overlooked and causing the rub.

This is the problem dealt with in this paper. Academicism was chosen as a case in point, but any phase of contemporary art could have been chosen

instead. Both are actually a scandal in the ideal perspective but have nonetheless invaded the scene.

Several aspects of the problem are discussed in the following chapters in the light of recent theories as well as analysed in concrete terms. In the first chapter, instead of the reader's being plunged into *abstracta* at once, he is presented with the contemporary reactions to the present "rising from the dead" of academic art, the ambiguities of the situation, the perplexities of the curators and historians in an unforeseen, unexpected, unclear concurrence of events. The second discusses the first signs of awareness of a wrong situation which a scholar intuited rather than analysed correctly. This is followed, in the same chapter, by a preliminary examination of a possible methodological approach to the correct answer. In conclusion, it is also tested, for the reader's benefit, on a concrete case. The third chapter is a moderately technical one. It analyses the problem in terms of informational aesthetics to which it was referred in the preceding chapters. Finally in the fourth, the problem of the genesis of academic art can be tackled in outline despite the paradoxical situation at that moment. The applied method serves for the disentangling of the confused causes and effects. To end the chapter on a visual note after much theorizing, the reader is shown, as a further example of paradoxes, an instance of bourgeois art in an aristocratic socio-cultural context of tsarist Russia.

### I

#### REHABILITATION AND RESURRECTION

Almost all trends and creators of the past knew the vicissitudes of fame. They were all hallowed and desecrated in turn. Some were rediscovered cen-

turies later. There is, however, no precedent for the total condemnation and banishment that became the lot of academic art after having stood in equally unprecedented high favour with the establishment and the public. But unique as they were in amplitude, the volcanic rise and almost cataclysmal annihilation of academic art are surpassed now by what some call a spectacular rehabilitation process and which amounts actually to a resurrection leaving surprised even those who approve of it, and baffled, puzzled, if not scandalized, the others. A *deus ex machina* for some, a jack-in-the-box for others, it should appear to the former as a miracle, to the latter as some sort of a joke, which it is neither. It is a serious cause of perplexity which requires, at least, some sort of adjustment and which is necessarily, as in the present situation, a makeshift one since the real problem does not seem to be understood.

The acuteness of the problem and the proposed remedies will be more readily understood if, as a first step, the predicament is presented. It can be best done if the already mentioned rub is demonstrated first by some concrete examples of the present imbroglio created by the sensational resurgence of academic art in the form of important exhibitions which puzzle more than convince public and critics alike and elicit cautious and ambiguous comments from the responsible curators. Since France was the initiator and greatest producer, if one may say it, of academic art and is now actively engaged in bringing it to the fore with its new grand scale temporary exhibitions series, this has, naturally, important repercussions in the press and is accompanied by curatorial glosses. Therefore, it seems to indicate that one should draw examples for this preliminary enquiry from what has become manifest on the testing ground Paris has developed into this respect.

In the lapse of five years three major exhibitions displaying the works of the former official art were organized for the benefit of the Parisian public. Significantly, no justification was given of the purpose of the costly shows unless one considers the cautiously ambiguous prefaces of the catalogues as such. Considering the disrepute of academic art, going to such expense should have logically meant a rehabilitation. To a much lesser degree, it could have appeared as a condemnation, a gratuitous folly if one takes into account the expenses and the sentence without appeal. So the greater was the perplexity.

The Paris daily newspaper *Figaro* sensed the dilemma and organized a sample opinion survey on

the occasion of the Equivoques Exhibition of 1973. As far as one can determine from the article, "no landslide rehabilitations, but an attachment to the symbols and images of the past"<sup>1</sup> was the public's verdict. Twice as many of the visitors who answered the questionnaire thought that academic art is acceptable than those who had a contrary opinion. In the view of some intellectuals, "academicism is on a par with the avant-garde, for, however contradictory, they create... malaise and confusion"<sup>2</sup>. Others thought that "technical skill, good intentions do not make up a good painting"<sup>3</sup>.

The survey offers no guarantee of having been properly conducted. One can nevertheless infer from it that the socio-cultural background is a determining factor in the shaping of opinions, an evidence that is not necessarily one for the average art historian. He would certainly not deny that there is a beholder, a public, but could not justify them as more relevant factors than mere and passive admirers and economic support. The great variety of factors responsible for how and what art is remains unnoticed. There is no or very little awareness that the same factors change though the labels remain the same, as the whole civilization changes. Artist and beholder are something different from what they were in the past, new factors were added such as that Napoleonic invention, the museum curator, a still mighty factor between the creator and public, but somewhat fossilized and musty. There is no consciousness that the functions are different, since the whole art complex has a different structure and functions differently. The curator is baffled by the resurgence of the banished old, the invasion of the new he does not understand. If he were asked to elaborate on it sincerely, he would find that the idealist schema of creator (active) and beholder (passive) relationship has been prevailed upon by the powers of darkness which use art as a means and so him as a showman. The success of his shows is now indeed a condition of his survival. Uneasy about what does not fit into his schema, reluctant to repudiate it, he tries to give both sides some satisfaction though he cannot make any of the sides really happy. A considerable passage is quoted *in extenso* as an instance from the preface of the catalogue of the *Le Musée du Luxembourg en 1874* exhibition which took place

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1. *Figaro*, 1 June 1974, p. 14.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

in 1974 in Paris. The writer is Michel Laclotte, chief curator of painting in the Louvre<sup>4</sup>.

The nineteenth century, finds Laclotte, is fashionable, but not only that of Delacroix and Cézanne. It was to be expected — the history of taste is built on such reversals, on such adjustments and it justly happens thus —, a new generation of dilettanti does not hesitate any more to handle severely the prestige of the “impressionists” con-

now on, the lucid and independent historian refuses to admit, without verification, as an established fact, the quasi-total eclipse to which the glory of impressionism and post-impressionism has, for such a long time, sentenced so many other trends of the second half of the nineteenth century. As a consequence, for some twelve years now, a series of spectacular resurrections were recorded which were evidenced by more and more numerous exhibitions in Europe and in the United States, daring ac-



FIGURE 1. Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, *Personnages visitant une ruine médiévale*. France, Private Collection. (Photo: Musées Nationaux, Paris).

sidered too exclusive, they are annoyed because of their world-wide triumph which certainly avenges them rightly for their tribulations in the past, but leads to irritant excesses to wit: shameful speculations which sacralize, at the highest prices, second rate products of pleinarism fin de siècle or insignificant sketches of the best masters, infantile art criticism which is always ready to decry the early beginnings of impressionism in every piece of painting prior to 1860 done with some liberty. From

quisitions of certain museums, the opening of specialized commercial galleries... the publication of scholarly works and even for the common reader. Unquestionable resurrections occurred, but sometimes, one must say, too hasty ones tainted by confusion, opportunism and ambiguities.

It should be added that the exhibitions are actually an effect, not a cause in this process of revivals. What really gave an impetus to rehabilitations, as there are also others, not only that of academic art, were the empty shelves of the *antiquaires*. They sold to the fast rising new affluent class everything there could be sold and serve as a

4. *Le Musée du Luxembourg en 1874. Peintures*, Catalogue rédigé par Geneviève LACAMBRE, avec la collaboration de Jacqueline de Rohan-Chabot, Édition des Musées Nationaux, Paris, 1974, p. 3 ff.

status symbol. That incited the traditional not any more so affluent upper classes to bring down from the loft the parents' silver wedding presents and Gallé vases. It was followed by the *Art Déco 1925* lamp-shades and what not of the less upper classes to arrive now at what a witty Saskatoon dealer called the indefinite article whose value and meaning is determined by the nostalgia of the buyer and the ability of the dealer to sell it.

## II ARTS AND ARTS

The ostracism of the past pronounced against academic art is reflected by the most widely read art histories as well as the principal general and specialised dictionaries. They either do not make the least reference to it or dispatch it with some derogatory remarks.

The first one, to the writer's knowledge, to take exception to it was Jean Cassou, director of the *Musée National d'Art Moderne* at the moment of writing his *Panorama*<sup>5</sup> dealing with contemporary art. To no little surprise of the reader, the first chapter entitled *Official Art* was not a diatribe against those who impeded the careers of the set under his custody, but an apology for omitting them for lack of studies done on them.

An history of modern art, are we told, i.e. of art created since the middle of the nineteenth century till our days, does not exhaust all the artistic production of that epoch. It covers, in point of fact, an extremely vast field and comprises innumerable works which are unknown or despised in our days, but were exhibited in the official Salons and whose authors were famous. It is customary now to concern oneself only with revolutions and movements that took place since Courbet, Manet and the impressionists. But these revolutions and movements could occur only by breaking with public taste and the society. The latter had its art which is not heeded any more. It should be, however, as every social manifestation, the subject of study and prompt the sociologists to investigate it as well as interest historians of art and civilization, aestheticians, philosophers. All these scholars could analyse and characterize it as they do with the art of some given society, of Etruscans, of the Chinese of the Song period, of the Bambaras, Awaiting such studies, it seems impossible to compile a panorama of modern art since 1900 to the present without reminding the reader of its precedents at the same time as of the existence of an art of the bourgeois

society at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century, of an art in which society found its image, in which society expressed itself, which was the official art, the bourgeois art.<sup>6</sup>

Cassou intuitively rather than justifies the necessity to make up for this omission of art history. It is a self-evident postulate with him that each art *qua* art of a society has to be granted the quality of art. That the factual criterion only did not reassure him entirely, in an evident contradiction with his thesis, can be deduced from a further passage where he suggests that "The sociologist and historian should analyse these reasons and these characteristics of the taste of the public for *this sort of art...*"<sup>7</sup>. He was not aware that there are publics rather than the public that he and other historians invested with all the virtues and the only one they really saw or thought that counted. For Cassou, a value scale is still indicative of greater or lesser rights arts can claim to be admitted to history.

This brings us to the preliminary discussion of the possible application of the recently developed aesthetic information theory to our problems. This theory irreverently "does not want to take cognizance, at the start, of any transcendental value of a work of art, but may reconsider it in a later phase of analysis"<sup>8</sup>. Not what art should be according to some absolute, but what it actually is within a given social context, do they contend, is determinant. Aesthetic relativism is as ancient as the Greeks, but informational aesthetics was the first to give it a scientific foundation by applying to it the general information theory.

Information is a measure. By information is measured the quantity of originality for a receiver, it is synonymous with the complexity of the message. Thus messages are more or less complex and contain more or less information. Communication, i.e. the sending of a message, has as a prerequisite: a common repertory. Musical notation of a given civilization cannot be read, as a rule, by musicians of another one. Thus the message of an Oriental composition would not be "received" by a Westerner. But not only because the notations are different repertories. The musical scales, rhythms etc. are also different. There is no aesthetic response, as a rule, to each other's aesthetic repertories, as Gothic style may not be received by a Chinese and the pagodas not by a Westerner.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 14. This writer's italics.

8. Abraham MOLES, *Art et Ordinateur*, en collaboration avec Marie-Luce André, Casterman, Paris, 1971, p. 15.

5. Jean CASSOU, *Panorama des Arts Plastiques Contemporains*, Librairie Gallimard, Paris, 1960.

Both the semantic and aesthetic messages will not be received. They are all repertoires, socio-cultural conventions which constitute the redundancies of civilizations. The same is true, within the same civilization, of various socio-cultural groups, for "beauty is linked to properties inherent in the creators and the receivers which is statistically demonstrable and amenable to experimental control"<sup>9</sup>. No absolute beauty is measured, not that of the intrinsic value of a work of art, but the value for a receiver of a given socio-cultural entity. Therefore the creator or sender at one end, and the receiver or beholder, spectator or listener at the other, already with their cultural heritage, inherit repertoires which reflect the whole social context as well as its aesthetics. In the former, a multiplicity of factors are at work which shape and modify the repertoires. The individual is, to a great extent, a creation of the society. In every day life or in artistic creation, for his repertoire and redundancy, he depends on it. Creation even of high originality is always creation for and as such a dialogue. Real soliloquy is impossible, it always supposes an interlocutor even if he is not present.

9. *Ibid.*

Thus art, which is communication, is part of a system as defined by cybernetics, the general science of systems. Although creator and receiver are the prominent protagonists of aesthetic communication, numerous are others who also influence the former, each other and thus the whole. The model or the schematized system is valid for all systems that function in an analogous way as organisms or mechanisms. They are conceived as functioning with an end to which the organs or self-organizing units adjust their function and can induce the whole function, in case of changes, to do same. Feedback — which is self-regulation through information received as a "reaction of the effect on the cause"<sup>10</sup> — is the operation which readjusts the cause to the sought end. In human models of high contingency, however, it is not sufficient and has to be done through reflected action.

The model can be used in planning of an adequate art activity in a given situation, e.g., in a newly planned industrial city, or serve for improving

10. *La Communication et les Mass Media*, rédigé sous la direction d'Abraham MOLES assisté par Claude Zeltmann, Les Dictionnaires Marabout Université, Gérard & Co., Bruxelles, 1973, p. 217.



FIGURE 2. Ilya Efimovich Repin, *They Did not Expect Him*. Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery.

an unsatisfactorily functioning existing one, and last, but not least, for analysing and understanding confused situations as the one caused by the "rising from the dead" of academic art.

An example of an unsatisfactorily functioning system is the Canadian domain of art. There are no collectors so to say, but there are artists who produce. The Art Bank, thanks to the generosity of the Canadian government, replaces them. It amounts to an introduction of a new unit instead of an adjustment of an existing self-organizing unit (the general public in this case) by sponsoring all measures that would spread connoisseurship. There are also other organs whose advancement is indispensable. So the Art Bank helps the artists, sets up a nice collection and remains one-sided, creating inevitable new imbalances. A properly planned cybernetic approach would have avoided this and had lasting effects<sup>11</sup>.

### III THE QUANTIFICATION OF QUALITY

Fechner was the first one who believed to have measured the reputedly unmeasurable, but he failed where he succeeded. He discovered that a determinable type of beauty is in correlation with an equally determinable group of subjects while he thought to have found the formal rules of absolute beauty. As it was said before, the relativism of beauty is an old thesis, but it was rather a doubt than a sufficiently substantiated affirmation. With this, the recent information theory of aesthetic perception has to be credited. It made obvious that beauty here below has measurable degrees for the mortals, and that there is a scale of precepts analysable into more and more complex structures. It found that the number of individuals in a population able to perceive a greater number is inversely proportional to the complexity. The ability to perceive the most complex ones is the privilege of a restricted minority which happens also to have the best cultural background. If one wants, one can erect, on this basis, a value scale with no absolute claims.

This aesthetic perception process is a global act that integrates elementary signs into a whole, which is then relied on as a *memorizing sign*, a *supersign*. It "appears first as a configuration (Gestalt), as a

means for the mind to reduce the quantity of raw information received from outside by arraying the elements into a 'normalized' form received from cultural learning"<sup>12</sup>. As it has just been said, cultural learning is the prerequisite of handling the most complex quantity of raw information. In other words, the subjects with the highest positive redundancy will be the only ones able to perceive, i.e. receive a message of high complexity and, therewith, of maximum originality containing *eo ipso*, maximum information. The redundancy level of the subjects is proportional to their capacity to receive information.

Pleasure results from multiple ways the aesthetic message affects the receiver. He is given, as it were, a task to solve that he does by drawing on his redundancy capital to master and complete forms by which he grasps and assesses the artist's accomplishments. This enables him also to project into the message of the artist his own visions. This is proper to the higher levels. At the other extreme, however, aesthetic pleasure is not the result of multiple appeals to rich cultural assets. They would not be received. In that situation, response is given to irrational messages which appeal to the senses, that thrill and to melodramatic or violent scenes. In that attitude, the receiver perceives, but does not conceive, and still all this is art. The painter can be no painter for the higher beholder and still fascinate the lower with his melodramatic narrative or gorgeous scenes in which case the painting becomes rather a means than an end in itself.

That there are arts of a wider appeal as well as more exclusive, while all of them are rightly considered as art, is an evidence to the contemporary literary history. Thus under the title *Another Literature*, in the introductory passage of the last chapter of a recent French literary history,<sup>13</sup> it is readily agreed with Alan Gowans that the "high" was originated by the "low",<sup>14</sup> which is the normal genetic process.

"Sub-literature", "paraliterature", the more or less contemptuous expressions abound for designating a production using various themes and media whose circulation and "consumption" are numbered among the most important phenomena of our epoch. The detective story, science fiction or the popular song and the strips, which add to language other means of expression, must they be despised

11. Cf. "A Little Paris Tempest over Canadian Art Policy" by Leo RYAN, special to the Globe and Mail, in *The Globe and Mail* of June 23, 1973. For more information write to the Director, Art Bank, Canada Council, 151 Sparks St., P.O. Box 1047, Ottawa K1P 5V8.

12. *La Communication et les Mass Media*, op. cit., p. 712 ff.

13. *Histoire de la Littérature française*, par et sous la direction de Pierre BRUNEL, professeur à la Sorbonne, Bordas, Paris, 1972.

14. Alan GOWANS, "Remarks on Arts and Utopias", in *RACAR*, Vol. 1, n° 1, pp. 5-13.

because of their enormous circulation, because too “easy”? A final judgment, sentencing these marginal forms of literature, would be rash and betray serious ignorance of the history of our letters<sup>15</sup>.

The measurement is done by the semantic assessment of the message, i.e. of the complexity of the physical stimulus or stimuli which elicit a response in this respect and of the homogeneous group having in majority received the aesthetic message.

who seeks easy success was already one *avant la lettre*. The psychology of aesthetics of R. Francès<sup>17</sup> reveals equally many hitherto unnoticed important aspects of music and visual arts which could be of great help to many creators and show them that inspiration can also be learnt by benefiting from the experience of others. Inspiration is 99.999...% positive redundancy.



FIGURE 3. Vasily Ivanovich Surikov, *The Boiarynia Morozova*. Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery.

The measure is objective. The measuring of the quality of the inner states is not attempted. It is a philosophical problem. Aesthetic information theory restricts itself to statistical probability being able to evaluate approximately the characteristics of the group and even more precisely the structure of the message. The appeal or non-appeal of a given message of a given complexity in any medium to a given group of a given complexity can thus be established with a fair probability, which can have many applications including the devising of programmes of aesthetic impact. The engineer of emotions is almost a reality<sup>16</sup> though the “artist”

#### IV THE ART OF EASY APPEAL AND ITS GENESIS

We know Pliny’s account of the perfect mimesis accomplished by the Greek painters, but we know also, if we look at Pompeian wall paintings, that no bird would peck at them. It takes the simple man little, whether he be of Athens or elsewhere, to gape and call it real. Giotto had also the reputation among his contemporaries of painting lifelike figures if we are to believe Vasari. Actually, the average beholder does not even notice mannerist elongations to say nothing of all the other liberties

15. *Histoire de la Littérature française, op. cit.*, p. 729.

16. Cf. Abraham MOLES, « Esthétique informationnelle de l’espace et théorie des actes », in *Art et Communication*, Les Cahiers du Centre Culturel Canadien — n° 1, Paris, 1971, pp. 15–38.

17. Robert FRANCÈS, *Psychologie de l’Esthétique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1968.  
*Idem*, *La Perception de la Musique*, Seconde édition avec un résumé analytique en anglais, J. Vrin, Paris, 1972.

painters may take. One may say that the degree of fidelity is inversely proportional to the pictorial quality. In any case, the innocent beholder wants to see pictures and is so engrossed in the subject that the details are not analysed. The Western painter did not, however, make special efforts till the nineteenth century to render realistic minutiae. Nobody before Bouguereau would have said "one has to copy without thinking everything one has before the eyes", to which he added "only painting imitating nature is painting". Nature was actually surpassed by him. He made it more real than the real, albeit it was called photographic. But what the lens and the sensitive plate could not render was corrected by the dexterous academic brush with a feeling of tactile values that the original message had not. Nature was made to look her best with the cosmetic of dainty tenebrist effects, little mists light as the veil on the nudes whose white nudity became even more highlighted by the contrast of fleeting shadows nearby.

And the time came when beside the artless poor who could not indulge their naïve taste, also a guideless and not yet sophisticated but rich new class appeared on the scene; the rising numerous bourgeoisie. They also found delight in looking at spectacular images and were lavishly served by the now patronless painter with views of heightened reality, gorgeous displays which metamorphosed the beholder into a spectator of pageants or monumental scenes from antiquity which shame Cecil B. de Mille. And so came to pass that the trivial entered the sphere of the lofty and the profound. It was the beginning of the "servile theatre" serving the new taste and whose authors

"owed their immediate success to the preestablished harmony which existed between them and the public. There was nothing, in their works, reminiscent of the search, the daring, the initial solitude of genuine works... it was always a theatre of the public — which wants to be listened to in order to listen to itself"<sup>18</sup>.

From then on the trash that pleased the new man was presented to him in the old precious bindings, frames and places of the former values. They were wrapped in silk and mounted in gold. The techniques were perfected for the stage and the visual arts and so were the container and support while the content was impoverished. The richness of the presentation must not be confused, however, with complexity. By complexity not the "richest"

stimulus is meant. The most gorgeous rich cake is simple, it appeals directly to the senses. Thus the most lavishly coloured image enhanced by other visual "titillations" is also the simplest one. And so the titillations which found no support before started draining all the money previously earmarked for the "classics" towards the coffers of the "photographic" painter.

It started with Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre's diorama which he opened in Paris in July 1822. His diorama combined with his future invention, the daguerreotypy, which will be set in motion by the Lumière brothers, contained not only in germ the future cinema, but, with its spectacular "photographic" images (before photography), it foreshadowed also academic painting. He was trained as a theatrical panorama painter. His *Personnages visitant une ruine médiévale* (Fig. 1) has certainly something to do with his diorama. Besides the romantic evocations, it equally adumbrates other traits of the not so distant academic painting. It is panoramic beyond the possibilities of photography. The subtle winter fog, the play of light on the columns, the snow that one can almost touch does not announce, but is, the future Meissonier. He and his emulators were most certainly familiar with Daguerre's "tricks". Daguerre is actually not their inventor, they can be found here and there with Neo-classicists and Romantics. Nevertheless, Daguerre was the man, like Giotto of Van Eyck, albeit some eyebrows may be raised, who came at the end and accomplished their synthesis.

The question arises whether we have to blame the bourgeois, if anyone has to be really blamed, for this art of the widest appeal ever known. In other words, should one stress his lack of judgment in contrast to the former patron, the Meacenas? Actually the connoisseurship of the great patrons has still to be proved. Nothing indicates that genuine interest and understanding motivated the generosity of the Meacenas, that sincere generosity it was and not only in the flattering praises of the livelihood seeking poet or artist. Nothing proves that he was a knowledgeable collector on a grand scale rather than a greater or lesser ruler or condottiere, who also made a political career, anxious to enhance his prestige and vie with his peers by surrounding himself with the splendours of art.<sup>19</sup> He, in any case, left the artist his freedom to a great extent. But was it because he saw eye to eye

18. Gaëtan PICON, in *Histoires des Littératures*, Encyclopédie de la Pléiade, tome III, p. 1125 (quoted after *Histoire de la Littérature française*, op. cit.).

19. Cf. D. S. CHAMBERS, *Patrons and Artists in the Italian Renaissance*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, South Carolina, 1971, pp. 116-120.



FIGURE 4. Vasily Ivanovich Surikov, *The Boiarynia Morozova*. Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery.

with the artist or because he believed in it? We know actually nothing about his taste or opinions. The patron was not a discoverer. He took no risks when he hired an artist, he was already famous, he bought his fame. There is no doubt that the genuine selective role was, in the first place, played by the artists themselves. Fame and trends were the result of their doings and undoings. Critics in the present sense did not exist yet.

While the socio-economic conditions allowed only a restricted number of “consumers” of art, these, highly concerned as they were about their prestige, left, with a safe instinct, the choice to the artists as well as the poets and humanists gracing their courts. The rising bourgeoisie, on the contrary, was not yet concerned with sophisticated status symbols. Their prestige was not at stake. They felt no restraint, at that stage, to indulge their candid genuine taste.

That the more subtilized art of the past was not necessarily the result of catering to a supposed aristocratic taste is supported by the readiness with which academic art was adopted by the aristocracies of Central and Eastern Europe, which still enjoyed their privileges together with all

advantages and refinements of education. That the aristocratic status is cosubstantial with refinement and ready access to recondite aesthetic spheres is highly doubtful.

This is a good opportunity to add a few examples of what the art of tsarist Russia produced during its last decades. Academic art is of course meant, as elsewhere, it was the recognized art. Three painters were chosen who not only convey best what was said on the preceding pages concerning this art, but they also show a trait peculiar to East-Central and Eastern European painting at that moment. As all the others between the Atlantic and the Ural, they chose spectacular, melodramatic and historical scenes as subject matters, but they had a particular preference for scenes from the national past that they conjured up with a pageantry and splendour that would have dazzled the ancestors.

The first one, Ilya Efimovich Repin (1884–1930), albeit he started as an “antiacademicist”, and whatever that meant in Russia, he became eventually professor of the Academy of Fine Arts of St. Petersburg and can be said to have been a full-blooded academic painter. His well-known *They Did not Expect Him* (1884) (Fig. 2) shows the

return of an exile from Siberia. The composition is not pictorial but staged, the characters are acting, all attention is dramatically focused on the protagonist. The release of past tensions is strongly expressed by gestures, gazes and attitudes. The old mother on the point of embracing her son, the wife who has just interrupted playing the piano, the son elatedly recognizing his father, the little daughter who does not remember him, the servant maids under the impact of the event, all contribute to the dramatic effect. One notices, inevitably, the story first and most beholders, nothing else, which is in itself the criterion of a "good" academic painting though the painters themselves would not admit it. A "connoisseur", one should add, would be expected to appreciate also the excellence of the technique as well as the choice of the subject matter. Repin is said to have several times changed the facial expressions of the protagonist and made many sketches from nature.

Another typical representative of the trend is Vasily Ivanovich Surikov (1848–1916). He exploits the possibility of picturesqueness and pageantry historical scenes offer. His *The Boiarynia Morozova* (1887) (Figs. 3 & 4) shows the transfer to prison of Morozova, opponent of church reforms. The various facial expressions and gestures, some approving of her and deeply sympathetic, some threatening, some hilarious at the ecstatic exhortation of the noblewoman, are also results of preliminary observations and numerous sketches. All contributes to a maximal impact.

The beholder is finally moved by Vasily Grigor'evich Perov's (1833–1882) *Farewell to the Defunct* (1865) (Fig. 5). The poor muzhik who died prematurely is taken in a poor coffin to the village cemetery. The griefstricken mother driving the horse, the boy, cold, glum and overcome by grief, the girl hugging the coffin of her father with a deep expression of sorrow on her face, the faithful dog



FIGURE 5. Vasily Grigor'evich Perov, *Farewell to the Defunct*. Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery.

which broke the rope he was attached with to accompany his master on his last journey, are melodramatic and photographic enough to move sensitive souls almost to tears.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE LOFTY  
AND THE LOW AS AN EPILOGUE

Enraptured by beauty man's feet easily leave the ground and so the blind causality which keeps him in bondage. Whether art, which makes light of the narrow constraining determinism, is an existentialist protest against the human condition and an attempt to recreate the world or just an illusion of evasion and a theme, like the Promethean, with which it has many common points, is beyond our scope. However that may be, every time an attempt is made to shackle the free, to reduce the unique to the multiple with the coercing universal laws of dull obsequious matter, with those of science, it is met with scepticism or scandalized protests. Man wants everything to obey him and, at the same time, in privileged situations and at elevated moments, he has an admonition of sacrilege to try to capture the sublime in his net. It is an eternal dilemma as it was also for Kant. With his monumental acrobatic

system, he tried to soothe his qualms and prove that rigour and freedom are not exclusive. He could not doubt that Newtonian physics and Euclidean geometry were binding truth. He could not resign himself to abdicating before constraint. Since then, our intuition has been reassured. While the noumenon remains veiled but present, the dividing line between constraint and contingency has become less sharp. Both are approximations for our guidance with various prevalences according to the domain. The rapprochement between norm and law is also in view. Action posits laws, otherwise it would be gratuitous. The laws of physics are a repertory, and we may say even a system of conventions, as are the aesthetic norms of a community. The latter exert, no doubt, less constraint. So no sacrilege is committed if the portion of recurrent aspects suggesting laws in the sublimest is also given some systematic consideration and gets clarified. It will also help to draw the line where constraint and contingency vanish as every movement and beyond which beauty appears unconditioned.

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