



French 19th-Century Painting: The Academic Tradition

While many scholarly accounts of 19th century French painting are justifiably concerned with the radical innovations of the Impressionists, the Academic tradition in France exerted a potent influence over the development of visual art well into the twentieth century. With Dr. Eric Weichel, participants will explore the life and legacy of six of France's most beloved academic artists: Jacques-Louis David, Jean-August-Dominique Ingres, Théodore Géricault, Jean-Léon Gérôme, Eugène Delacroix, and William-Adolphe Bouguereau.

Week 1: David

Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784) set new standards of archaeologically-informed, historically plausible neoclassicism in French painting, a development that the artist himself quickly harnessed to the burgeoning revolutionary movement. As a supporter of the tyrannical Robespierre, the artist was eventually imprisoned for his unequivocal support of the Revolution's more bloodthirsty excesses, but his estranged (Royalist) wife Marguerite-Charlotte Pécou, who had divorced him after his vote for Louis XVI's execution, was instrumental in securing his release. In response, David created the famous *Intervention of the Sabine Women*, 1799, celebrating the (supposed) role of women as mediators in war. David's Napoleonic portraits built upon this synthesis of the personal and the political, showing the Emperor and his family in a variety of heroizing guises. Following Napoleon's eventual defeat, David went into exile at Brussels, where his late work is marked by a delicate eroticism and highly-polished finish, two components of his mature style that would be much emulated by his students Antoine-Jean Gros, François Gérard, Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson, and Jean Broc, whose work is also under consideration in this unit.

Week 2: Ingres and Delaroche

David's most prolific student and successor as France's leading neoclassical painter was Jean-August-Dominique Ingres, whose early historicizing work, such as *The Ambassadors of Agamemnon in the Tent of Achilles*, 1801, was much criticized by the French academic establishment. As a portraitist, Ingres excelled in the interplay of heavily patterned, strikingly coloured textiles against the creamy, Raphaellesque textures of female flesh, and his images of women, such as his lovely *Valpinçon Bather*, 1808, or the exaggerated mannerism of his *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814, became progressively more sensual throughout his career, culminating in the scandalously excessive Orientalist view of *The Turkish Bath*, 1852 – 1862. But Ingres was also a deeply religious man. *The Vow of Louis XIII*, 1824, displays something of the nationalist piety

that inspired Ingres' work, and his late portraits, including those of Second Empire noblewomen, such as that of the tragic *Princesse de Broglie*, 1851-1853, are unmatched in their sensitive depiction of the sitter's character. A major rival to Ingres was the history painter Paul Delaroche, whose theatrical depictions of melodramatic moments in the not-too-distant European past are vivid windows onto the popular interest in history, literature and theatre in the Romantic era. Delaroche's magnificent *Death of Elizabeth I*, 1828, for example, is a rich riot of colour and lavish spectacle, contrasting with the sombre austerity and emotional intensity the artist displays in his haunting *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*, 1833.

Week 3: Géricault

"It is France herself, our whole society, that he has embarked on this raft", wrote historian Jules Michelet in 1847 of Théodore Géricault's searing 'Raft of the Medusa', an innovative and ambitious canvas depicting the survivors of a failed colonial voyage to Senegal in 1816. To be as accurate as possible in depicting the shipwrecked party's suffering, the young artist, known for his love of wild horses (and his uncle's much-younger wife, with whom he had an illegitimate son), borrowed the body parts of cadavers from which to study, training his hand to correctly show the greenish tinge of decaying skin. Géricault's work is as uncompromising as it is sensual: the officers of Napoleonic cavalry regiments are shown, not as the conventional idealized hero, but as broken, terrorized men whose inner mental state is poignantly mirrored by their foaming, wide-eyed, high-strung stallions, while his erotic work, such as the *Three Lovers*, 1817-1820, *Leda and the Swan*, 1817, or *Mazeppa*, 1819, is consistently avant-garde in a suggestively provocative, and yet decidedly humanizing way. The intertwined forms of the *Three Lovers* are rendered without judgement, and if Leda's glance at a looming divine Swan has little in common with the simpering chill of earlier works by artists like da Vinci or Correggio, Géricault's writhing, bound, sweating body of the unfortunate Mazeppa is one born of his admiration for the passionate writing of Lord Byron. The artist's early death from tuberculosis in 1824 was universally lamented by the Parisian art world, many members of which, such as Géricault's friend and colleague Ary Scheffer, recognized the passing of a figure who had lived before his time. Scheffer's *Géricault on his Deathbed* shows the wan, pale body of the artist mourned by his despairing friends: highlighted by bright light, the dead man is surrounded by his sketches of rearing horses, classical landscapes and amorous couples, reiterating the major themes of an extraordinary figure's all-too-curtailed oeuvre.

Week 4: Delacroix

With Géricault's death came the meteoric rise of Eugène Delacroix, a young painter whose wild brushwork, lascivious subjects and unrestrained use of intense colour might well have been expected to bury any chance of success in the increasingly conservative, heavily politicized society of mid 19th-century France. As it was, Delacroix's remarkable career accomplishments were such that it was whispered he was protected by the great statesman Talleyrand, whose secret son he might well have been. By attaching himself, at his own expense, to the 1832 Moroccan mission of the diplomat Duc de Mornay, Delacroix was able to gain direct access to the newly-colonized Maghrebi world, and several of his North African works have the immense vigour born of immediate observation, such as *Jewish Wedding in Morocco*, c. 1839 or *The Women*

of *Algiers*, 1834; his grand equestrian portrait of *Moulay Abd-al Rahman*, Sultan of Morocco, depicted on horseback, framed by the ancient walls of the Palace at Meknes and surrounded by his pale-robed, grave-faced entourage, is particularly compelling. Delacroix was also a political artist, whose fascination with the struggles for political autonomy in Greece resulted in his controversial *Massacre at Chios*, 1824, and who, following the Orleanist revolutions in Paris reworked his figure of *Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi* (1826) as the world-renowned *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830, an image which to this day stridently calls for political freedom and social justice. With all these strengths, Delacroix was very much a man of his time: the popular fascination with the Middle East also came with the projection of contemporary economic and social desires onto an imaginarily static, unchanging and barbaric Arab "Other", in which medievalizing or other nostalgic forms of representation triumphed over accuracy. *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827-1828, takes a prurient and gruesome misogyny as its major theme, even as it depicts a nebulous, mostly unattested historical figure as its purported subject.

Week 5: Jean-Léon Gérôme

By the mid to late 19th century, and largely in response to the swaggering bravado of Courbet's bourgeois Realism, the sensual, linear, historically-informed neoclassical style and the more gestural, colouristic, poetic manner of its Romantic rival gradually merged, culminating in the breathtakingly-detailed Orientalist canvases of Gérôme. Gérôme's long career as an instructor at the *École des Beaux-Arts* positioned him as the Academy's official response to the growing threat of Impressionism. "How can the government dare to welcome a collection of such inanities into a museum?" he asked. "The state, the ward of such junk!". The beloved artist and professor's own work was far more studious, labour-intensive and archaeologically aware than any of the plein-air spontaneity championed by either the Realists or the Impressionists: *Pollice Verso*, of 1872, for example, shows the roar of a blood-thirsty Roman crowd in the Coliseum with an exhaustive and highly evocative practice, while *Éminence grise* of 1873 depicts the senior advisor of Cardinal Richlieu descending a ceremonial staircase engrossed in his bible, unaware, or perhaps uncaring, of the diverse crowd of flamboyantly-garbed clerics and noblemen who make him their deepest obeisances. In both works, Gérôme vociferously insists on the corporeality of the past, be it in the sunlight that slants over the turquoise finery of a state carpet spread beneath the jeering Vestal Virgins, or in the shimmer of marble beneath the hermit-friar's feet. Gérôme's best and worst features is in how vividly he conjures an imaginary world: if his scenes from European history dramatize important episodes within a national, or even imperial, character, his prolific output of Orientalist works are less palatable to the politics of today. *The Snake Charmer*, of 1879, was brilliantly used on a popular cover of Edward Said's 1978 'Orientalism' to highlight the colonial nature of much of Gérôme's scenes of Islamic life, where sexual decadence, moral corruption, political cruelty and cultural exoticism mingle to suggest a completely fantastical notion of Muslim Society. The snake writhing around the barely-clad teenage boy in *The Snake Charmer* (itself an Indian, not a Middle Eastern, custom) is a South American species, and if the lovely blue calligraphic tilework behind the Pasha and his Guard is indicative of Gérôme's sharp interest in Islamic art, the chipped terracotta, stained floor and slumped, vacuous interest expressed by the soldiers of colour all combine to suggest, falsely, a world incapable of resisting the modernity of an industrialized, capitalized west.

Week 6: Bouguereau

Few 19th-century French artists continue to engender as much controversy, as well as much admiration, as William-Adolphe Bouguereau, whose *Birth of Venus*, 1879, or *Nymphs and Satyrs*, 1873, exemplify the glibly polished, idealistic, traditionally classical themes of academic art in late 19th-century France. Bouguereau, Alexandre Cabanel, Ernest Meissonier and Thomas Couture commanded enormous prices from American and other wealthy collectors in their own lifetime, achieving levels of critical and commercial success that were unprecedented: Meissonier's scene of a Napoleonic battle, 1807, *Friedland*, for example, sold for the then-astronomical price of \$60 000 to a department store magnate, while Bouguereau's idealistic depictions of barely pubescent peasant girls, angels, shepherdesses, and other largely socially disengaged topics were very popular among American industrialists of the 'Gilded Age'. However, despite these artist's undeniable technical skills, their commercialism was derided by a growing number of intellectuals who sought spiritual and aesthetic vitality in other directions: Degas described any work his circle saw as slick, shallow and overfinished work as full of "Bouguereauté", while Gauguin, no stranger to an obsession with very young women, famously remarked that the only time he smiled in front of a Bouguereau painting was in a chance encounter in an Arles brothel, "where they belonged". Savage criticism indeed from two of the most influential patriarchs of Modernist art, and it is perhaps no surprise that in 20th century dominated by Picasso and Pollock, Rothko and Rauschenberg, Bouguereau and his academic brethren have been, until recently, relegated to the shadows. In this, our final unit, participants explore the changing reception of Bouguereau and other French academic artists, exploring some of the unexpected afterlives in fashion, television, kitsch, and other forms of popular culture than these artists continue to enjoy.

