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The Art of Beating the Bounds: Art History in French Institutions

he Institut national d'histoire de l'art, founded in 2001 in Paris, was explicitly designed as "an original creation to revitalise our country's discipline, which, despite its rich potential, suffers from scattered resources, the lack of coordination between actors and institutions, and the absence of collaborative spaces" (Histoire de l'art 1989, 76). Even though an early awareness and cultivation of its own heritage has been key in shaping France's cultural identity as an artistic nation, art history is forever presented as a young, emerging discipline, its boundaries yet to be defined, its potential to be realised. Paradoxically, the regular attempts to beat its bounds, while producing a narrative of absence, belatedness and shortcomings, have also, over time, fed into the *ethos* of a legitimate discipline, worthy of the nation's prestigious artistic heritage and embedded in an intellectual elite working closely with museums and with the art world.

AN ARTISTIC NATION IN NEED OF AN ARTISTIC EDUCATION

The impression that an autonomous art history has long been absent from French institutions compared to, in particular, German-speaking countries, is partly a consequence of the fragmentation of the intellectual landscape in which it emerged in the second half of the 19th century. The subject has been taught in a range of institutions with distinct, sometimes rivalling, traditions, vocations and publics beyond the university. Places like the École des beaux-arts, the École du Louvre or the Collège de France formed "a complex knot in which the emergence of art history as a French singularity was impeded" (Recht 2006, 48). The nature of art criticism as practiced in France also delayed the need for any instutional framework (Recht 2008, 7f.). The 19th century specificity of the écriture-artiste was "almost the cause of a misunderstanding with other countries, of a deep disagreement on what [did] or [did] not constitute art history" (Recht 2006, 53). It introduced early confusion "between theory of art and theory of art history" (56): it was felt that theory of art relied on an innate aesthetic sensibility, or, in the words of art critic Ferdinand Brunetière, on the intuitive notion that "masterpieces [were] masterpieces before they [were] documents" (Brunetière 1882, 448).

The topoi of clarity and simplicity as the highest virtues of French language prevailed in artwriting, and were opposed to qualities associated with German scholarship, for example in Charles Blanc's preface to Grammaire historique des arts et du dessin (1860): "It is possible to treat aesthetics under the serviceable veil of the German language, for a people whom the twilight enchants and which is endowed with the faculty of seeing clearly in the dark, but [not] in France, in the midst of a nation of the Latin race, whose indigenous good sense is a perpetual irony against dreamers" (Blanc [1860] 1874, xix). However, this opposition in favour of France was deployed by Blanc to atone for an "anomaly" that his book intended to correct: "France in the nineteenth century presents the incredible anomaly of an intellectual nation professing to adore Art, but knowing not its principles, its language, its history, its veritable dignity, its true grace" (xvii). Blanc judged France to be "one of the most backward nations in Europe" (xvi), and Brunetière, twenty years later, was even harsher: "By one of these familiar contradictions,

the same country of France that likes to think – to follow fashion, or because of a national fatuity, rather than by conviction, I fear – of itself as traditionally interested in art, was among all the countries in Europe the country where one had the least precise knowledge, and the least access to means to acquire it" (Brunetière 1882, 445).

With its core principle of hosting "a science in the making" (Ernest Renan), the Collège de France became the space where pedagogical experimentation would meet cultural politics, to educate a public fit to appreciate and emulate the nation's artistic wealth. As illustrated by the rejection of art critic Théophile Silvestre's idea to open a chair titled "modern history of art", that he put forward in 1861 in a letter to Napoleon III (Therrien 1998, 134), the solution to fill the gap in the public's general appreciation of art was not to propose the equivalent of Kunstgeschichte, unachievable because of the considerable head start enjoyed by German-speaking scholarship. Instead, in 1868, député Charles Boysset recommended a chair that would bear the same name as the one then occupied by the famous Hippolyte Taine at the École des beaux-arts - "aesthetics and art history". The Beaux-Arts' focus on the instruction of artists was deemed too limited to make up for the underrepresentation of aesthetics in French institutions compared to the rest of Europe: "It seems indispensable that such a deficiency should be addressed [...]" by the Collège de France, in order to support the development of taste and improve appreciation of art in France. Unlike art history, the primacy of which was grudgingly conceded to German scholars, aesthetics could be claimed by French academia, if only as an unfulfilled yet promising potential (quoted in Oléron Evans 2020, §6).

The Collège de France's "double-titled chair" (René Cagnat, quoted in Oléron Evans 2020, §3) of aesthetics and art history – continued under this name until 1919 and again from 1926 to 1942 – transformed art history's youth and its lack of fixed theoretical foundations into an asset, by coupling it with a French version of aesthetics that would finally have an opportunity to find its audience.

Although the proportion and emphasis of each of the subjects evolved with the change of personnel, the successive professors of aesthetics and art history had in common an understanding of their crucial pedagogical duty to the nation: the first professor appointed, Charles Blanc, was posthumously praised by his successor Eugène Guillaume for his possession, "in the most liberal and communicative manner, of the science of popularisation and the erudition of taste". Guillaume himself associated "the science of form" and "the science of ideal" into a practical aesthetics in the service of art appreciation, while the teaching of his assistant Georges Lafenestre, later appointed to the chair after Guillaume's death in 1905, used aesthetic theory as a tool to underpin the teaching of the history of artistic techniques and styles (§19-21). This shift paved the way for the inauguration of André Michel's chair in "history of French art" in 1919. Leaving aesthetics, almost dismissively, to philosophers, Michel traced in his inaugural lecture the boundaries of his teaching as a "study where an ever deeper and reasoned knowledge could be fostered, fortified and circulated, of those monuments to French genius and to French taste which bear witness to our nation's involvement and role in the great work of human civilisation and make more obvious to us the reasons why we should be faithful and love it with the love of grateful sons" (Michel 1920, 385). In this statement of principle, Michel expressed no doubt about the direction to be taken by the discipline: monuments of French art should be the objects of a "heritage science" (Passini 2017, 9), accessible, required, even, for the elevation of the whole nation.

Informed by the need to educate the nation on its own heritage and to fulfil the dream, born out of the French Revolution, of transforming France itself into a large museum – a modern incarnation of which would be, in the eye of the general public, André Malraux's grand project for an "imaginary museum" –, French history of art developed as an "empirical history of art" (Recht 2006, 46). The École du Louvre was founded in 1882 to foster the professionalisation of curatorial practices, in order to level up and be competitive against London and Berlin museums. Upon its opening, Eugène Ledrain urged the École to "raise and maintain an army, for fear of seeing the decline of French collections". These museum professionals turned "soldiers of science" should "serve their country in the noblest of ways" (Ledrain 1882, 530). In the spirit of strengthening France's position in the international museum landscape, the École's first director Louis de Ronchaud described it as a "practical school of archaeology and art history, analogous to [the] École des hautes études", with a focus on direct contact with artworks (quoted in Picot 2005, 102). To justify its existence, it also needed to attract a public of auditeurs, for whom, however, the prospect of gaining knowledge on the Louvre's art collections had more appeal than that of training in specialised skills. This led in 1886 to the launch of a class on the history of painting, taught by Georges Lafenestre, and one on the history of sculpture in 1887, by Louis Courajod. The school's own director was reluctant to grant space to what he called "speculations on painting and sculpture", the adequate place for which, he thought, should instead be "newspapers and journals". A few years after the appointment of Lafenestre and Courajod, and even in the face of the undeniable popularity of art history classes over archaeology, de Ronchaud was sceptical and alleged its lack of clear methodology when criticising the potential impact of the introduction of art history, fearing that "to give a lot of space to disciplines devoid of real recognition would weaken the school's scientific credibility" (105). It is nonetheless at the École du Louvre that Courajod's course on sculpture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance gave shape to a version of art history "the priority of which is to trace back the assertion of national aesthetic specificity across the centuries" (Passini 2017, 23). By arguing that the movement of the Renaissance had taken roots in French art production, Courajod provided the historical foundations of an artistic memory of the French nation, and demonstrated that art history could become "a useful and necessary discipline, precisely because it was political" (27).

THE PLACE(S) OF ART HISTORY IN FRENCH UNIVERSITIES

The institutionalisation of art history in French universities was impeded by the specific nature of the university system, designed under Napoleon as the continuation of secondary education. The agrégation examination, defined in its modern form in 1821 as a professional qualification for secondary education teaching, was also needed to pursue an academic career. Beside its symbolic role in a process of intellectual selection, the agrégation marked the acknowledgement of an existing field of expertise with clear boundaries, within which an examination programme could be determined by established scholars. The absence of such examination in art history meant that it remained in a subordinate status compared to other disciplines in the humanities, even after the creation of the first dedicated chair in 1890 in Lille. At the Sorbonne, historian Ernest Lavisse's assistant, Henri Lemonnier, taught from 1893 a complementary class on art history as part of the history curriculum, until its transformation into an autonomous chair in 1896. The same year, Lavisse included in the programme of the history agrégation examination a question on gothic art, confirming implicitly the historical emphasis given to the study of art and its objects in France in a scholarly context, as elements of a deeper understanding of the nation's past (Therrien 1998, 343).

The foundation of these art history chairs contributed to the circulation of a national discourse on art, a goal that Émile Mâle had actually named as central in his sketch of potential directions for the teaching of the discipline in France in 1894: "Our duty is to teach young people not to be indifferent when they walk past artworks in which our fathers have put so much genius and so much love [...]. All the old Frances of yesterday, the five or six Frances preceding ours, must live in us. It is the price we must pay if we want to develop harmoniously in the future" (Mâle 1894, 16f.). Mâle went on to teach at the Sorbonne on history of Christian art in the Middle Ages, a course created especially for him in 1906. Many of his contemporaries shared his faith in the existence of a national aesthetic identity that their teaching was designed to galvanise. For instance, in his 1903 analysis of the teaching of art history in France, the Belgian art historian Hippolyte Fierens-Gevaert noted that Courajod's teaching, evoked above, "relied entirely on the hypotheses suggested to him by his sentiment and his love for national art" (Fierens-Gevaert 1903, 150f.). Courajod was presented as a counterexample to what Fierens-Gevaert considered a regrettable evolution of French art history, increasingly showing "a lack of spiritual unity": "the love for the precise catalogue has substituted itself to the old philosophy; the scientific realism stifled the old religion of Beauty. [...] This new science, Art history, is threatened with bankruptcy" (150). Art history's aspiration to be elevated to the status of science through rigorous methods and factual erudition risked drving it out of all substance and alienating potential students: "Did Courajod make such a significant impact on the art criticism of his time by studying French art scientifically? Not at all. [...] To him, the work of art was a living person" (149). Here, we touch again upon art's special status among human realisations, still illustrated in 1923 by Paul Valéry's comments on "the problem with museums": "In questions of art, learning is a sort of defeat: it illuminates what is by no means the most subtle, and penetrates to what is by no means the most significant. It substitutes theories for feelings and replaces a sense of marvel with a prodigious memory. It amounts to an endless library annexed to a vast museum: Venus transformed into a document" (Valéry 1960, 1293).

The first generation of scholars to have received some formal training in the discipline had to find their way between these two extremes of dilettantism and lifeless erudition. In 1914, in a chapter on "Method in art history" published in a special issue of the *Revue de synthèse historique*, Louis Hourticq made a point of not settling on one option over another: "The following thoughts are not aimed at the construction of an edifice, nor even at the drawing of a ground plan. Supposing such a project would be sensible, one would not wish it to be completed. Every method relies to a lesser or greater extent on the spirit of geometry, however the work of art is of such complexity that it can only be tackled with the spirit of finesse. Sciences who settle on their method are also the sciences who can take stock. Art history is much too young to find in the past what could guide its future. It is going through a period where flair and instinct are much more useful than predetermined recipes" (Revue de synthèse historique 1914, 19). Hourticq used a convoluted logic to argue that art history needed to emancipate itself from the dependence of archival research, through the development of a new, yet to be defined method which, although rigorous and scientific, would guarantee a meaningful relationship to its object, in a "purely artistic analysis" (35). The future direction envisaged for the discipline, still described as young, would not only terminate its status of auxiliary to history, it would acknowledge its position as one of the most important subject in the humanities: "since the work of art is the supreme result of a civilisation, the whole of history, of race, and of geography, can be found in it" (ibid.).

A laudatory review of Austrian art historian Hans Tietze's Methode der Kunstgeschichte (1913) by Louis Réau followed Hourticq's proposal and suggested that French scholars would do well to read Tietze's synthesis, as a warning against an overreliance on the "flair and instinct" French art history was praised for: "Art is, in appearance, accessible to all: because it is addressed to everyone, the conclusion is hastily drawn that everyone can understand it and that anyone has a say about it. [...] There is only one way to fight against this dilettantism that negates the legitimacy of art history, or degrades it: a rigorous method" (47). In the second section of the special issue, on the teaching of art history in universities in France, Germany, England, Austria, Belgium, Italy and Switzerland, and in French secondary schools, French contributors including Henri Focillon set great score on finding methods that would be robust enough to underpin a scholarly discourse on art: in Lyon, where a chair of art history opened in 1898, Focillon reported that his teaching was "not solely a luxury enjoyed by an elite, nor a pleasant complement to history and literature" (55) and

revolved around putting artworks through "a methodical questionnaire" (56) – without however explaining how the results of these observations were analysed.

During and in the aftermath of the First World War, when the urge to know France's art heritage better in the face of its potential destruction aligned with their work, French art historians gained added legitimacy in the public sphere through their ability to give a voice to a sentiment of national unity. A 1920 law forbidding the exportation of listed artworks increased the demand for trained experts able to catalogue monuments and advise on their preservation (Genet-Delacroix 1985, 90). This context boosted the discipline's appeal, the image of which was still, when Focillon took stock of the teaching of archaeology and art history in Paris in 1927, "a sort of privilege for a happy few, for narrow circles" (Focillon 1927, 546). The broadening of the social need for art history therefore contributed to its becoming "an intellectual discipline, a standalone mode of research with its own methods, whose field is both considerable and finite" (546f.). The discipline would thrive in the autonomous Institut d'art et d'archéologie inaugurated in 1931. Its remits as sketched by Focillon signalled the coming of age of art history in France: "through the scope of its services, the variety of resources and the efficiency of its distribution, [the institute] will represent an ensemble probably unique in the world. [Its fundamental teachings] already form a whole tightly connected to each of its parts, with a singular character, its tradition, its methods, its programme of extension" (549). The Institut also boasted an important resource to assert its autonomy: the library of art and archaeology donated to the Université de Paris by fashion designer Jacques Doucet in 1917, one of the largest in the world (Genet-Delacroix 1985, 90).

BEATING THE BOUNDS: OPENING OR CLOSURE?

The same Bibliothèque d'art et d'archéologie legated by Doucet was at the centre of the project "to design and plan for a great institution dedicated to the research and diffusion of history of art, which, in France, is missing", as defined by Premier Ministre Pierre Mauroy in 1983 in a letter to art historian André Chastel, in charge of the preliminary report on the foundation of an Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA) (quoted in Schnapper 1991, 51). This organisation would save the library from the vagaries of local university administration that had rendered its fate uncertain after the promising start announced by Focillon, a precariousness of resources that explained art history's lingering marginalisation in post-war universities. The discipline had remained marginalised in France through to the 1970s, even though, on the international stage, the work of French scholars such as Pierre Francastel in sociology of art, or Hubert Damisch and Louis Marin in semiotics, was highly influential on the proponents of the New Art History. These art historians, however, were working at the École pratique des hautes études, which fostered interdisciplinarity, whereas most university chairs argued for the need to preserve art history's autonomy. "Was it due to [art history's] extreme youth? Too young to rebel, at the same time that it was experiencing the recognition it had long aspired to?" (Recht 2006, 58). As a result of this relative inertia in the national academic landscape, the dominant analysis in a 1991 survey of art historians and critics entitled "Where is art history in France at?" was that the discipline was still experiencing an extended identity crisis, despite a boom in the nation's interest for its art exemplified by blockbuster exhibitions. Coming from a vast range of methodological horizons, they nonetheless referred back to a common scholarly tradition, albeit multifaceted, when placing their hopes in the opening of the INHA as catalyser for the symbolic recognition of the discipline, both among the general public and by its peers, nationally and internationally (Le Débat 1991).

The variety of answers to "Where is art history at?" located the discipline at a crossroads, faced with a choice between closing in on its own boundaries or embracing the possibility of renewal through contact with other fields. The former view was defended in the *Revue de l'art* on the ground that "art history is always threatened with the risk of being reduced to a threadbare version of itself, or simply erased from the map, because of how coveted the rare positions available are by neighbouring disciplines" (Revue de l'art 1996, 6). Against that threat, established art historians such as Chastel promoted a targeted and meaningful implantation that would maintain the teaching of art history within the bounds of its true spirit and function: Chastel "did not wish for it to be studied everywhere, in every university that opened left, right and centre [...], but for it to be solidly embedded in a group of strong and old universities, spread as harmoniously as possible across the country" (Schnapper 1991, 51). The need for art history to be taken seriously and to challenge its reputation among the French public as a "minor subject" or a "pastime" (Revue de l'art 1996, 5) justified the high standards to which its institutions should be held. However, this argument was also criticised for enabling a gatekeeping of the discipline: "We know that audiences, even carefully handpicked through social selection, have never been equal to the expectations of 'specialists'" (Bertrand Dorléac 1995, 100). The creation of the INHA was meant to help solve this French dilemma: in order to educate the nation to appreciate its own artistic heritage, the institution would need to invent an alternative to the "mundane use of knowledge about art" (Recht 2006, 55) entertained by an intellectual elite who identified not only art, but also art history itself, as a potent cultural marker to confirm its own distinction.

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