

# Antiquity as a Dream

## L'Antiquité rêvée: innovations et résistances au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle.

Paris, musée du Louvre, 2 December 2010 to 14 February 2011;

Houston, Museum of Fine Arts, 20 March to 30 May 2011.

Catalogue with texts by Stephen Astley, Guillaume Faroult, Marc Fumaroli, Alexandre Gady, Bénédicte Gady, Thomas W. Gaehtgens, Christophe Lérébault, Angela Loda, Christian Michel, Guilherm Scherf, and Helen Smailes. Paris, Louvre Editions/Gallimard 2010. 502 p., var. ill. ISBN 978-2-07-012088-7

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**T**he exhibition mounted by the Louvre proposed an overview of European neoclassicism by assembling over 150 works of art in almost all media. About a third of exhibits came from the museum's collection, including undisputed masterpieces by François Boucher, Edme Bouchardon, Jean-Honoré Fragonard and Jacques-Louis David. Upon moving to the Houston Museum of Fine Arts it has been somewhat modified, the catalogue translated from the French is cut down from 500 to 200 pages and the title has changed to *Antiquity revived: Neoclassical Art in the 18<sup>th</sup> century*. For the most part, the exhibits were stunning thanks to the clout of the Louvre in negotiating loans. The visual impact and appeal of many of the works in the show was so strong and some of the sequences so eloquent that the ordering concept of the whole seemed secondary. In an article promoting the show, the organizers claim revision of „une histoire de l'art simpliste“ in which „tout devenait néoclassique“

after the rococo (Henri Loyrette) and to unlock a narrowly-defined subject with the help of new keys: „les diversités nationales, les querelles de doctrines, les décalages chronologiques, les persistances, les résistances, les recours agressifs à différents passés“ (Marc Fumaroli; cf. „Entretien“, *Grande Galerie. Le journal du Louvre*, n° 14, December 2010–February 2011, 38). Even though specialists across Europe have put these same keys to work for over a generation and none would argue that neoclassicism ever attained a position of absolute hegemony in the arts, the proposed transmission of a fuller picture to a wider audience was a laudable agenda. It will be argued that somehow it floundered along the way, an explanation that needs to be teased out in the manner one confronts ideological constructs qualified by their authors as natural.

## REMAPPING THE FIELD OF RESEARCH

Fifty years ago this particular field of research was remapped by an avant-garde of scholars, collectors, dealers and interior decorators who shared an enthusiasm for the arts of the 18<sup>th</sup> century modeled on the legacy of styles and motifs from Antiquity. The novelty of the endeavor was to give prominence to sculpture and the decorative arts, to study more thoroughly the columnated architecture adopted by architects, to envisage an international phenomenon and to look beyond the canonical scenes of ancient history painted by David and his school, positively reappraised in art historical scholarship since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The hard-edged patterns, bold contrasts, corporeal language and poised eroticism these pioneers found attractive in neoclassical art paralleled the contemporaneous reaction in the art world against the style and ethos of abstract expressionism. Their scholarly enthusiasm was on par with that of their 18<sup>th</sup> century forbears whose tireless programs of excavation, collecting, study and publication had



Fig. 1 Sitzender Perseus, antike Skulptur, restauriert von Lambert-Sigisbert Adam, um 1740. Paris, Palais du Luxembourg (Kat.nr. 1)

exploded the canonical framing of the Antique. Over time a corpus has been brought to light that is as multifaceted as Medieval or Renaissance art, or even as varied as the epoch-making artistic movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The creative diversity of 18<sup>th</sup> century neoclassicism is presently so distinctive that many specialists, in doubt of the capacity of the term to subsume widely differing artistic agendas, prefer to avoid using it. As the extended entries in the French version of the catalogue indicate, a wealth of information is available on the artists and works in the show and the authors are to be commended for processing so many recent findings and commentaries.

On account of the many thousands of works of art historical interest corresponding to the theme of the Louvre project, the pedagogical challenge to cover artistic production from 1720 to 1790 across Europe was courageous, and probably also somewhat ill-advised. The scope of exhibitions today that make a contribution to art history, even those organized by major museums with ample

means, tends to be limited by chronological and geographical focus, as well as selectivity with regard to artists, categories of object, themes, and cultural phenomena. The organizers no doubt esteemed that the influence of Antiquity during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe was an aptly circumscribed topic and thus relatively easy to translate into a set of meaningful exhibits. The reassuring notion that much of the art produced during the century could be left out because it was not judged sufficiently *à l'antique* no doubt turned out to be a problem, for when visibility of this reference is the criteria for inclusion in the show, the result is a focus on imitation and pastiche.

Elimination of borderline works constitutes too narrow an approach, while the presence of too many puts the project at risk of dissolution. An impressive *Rape of Europa* by François Boucher (n° 2, fig. 4; Salon of 1747, Louvre), hung at the very beginning of the exhibition, and the most idiosyncratic works in the show by Francesco Solimena, Giambattista Tiepolo, Jean-Baptiste II Lemoyne and Luis Paret exemplified this dilemma. Boucher's mythological iconography, sensuous handling and animated composition were intended as foils for what came next. However in spite of a selection meant to demonstrate the contrary, many of the exhibits – paintings by Francisco Goya, Gaetano Gandolfi, and even an early work by David – appeared to have much in common with Boucher's *manière française* reviled by Winckelmann, Diderot, Reynolds and the same David.

### PROGRESS AND RESISTANCE?

The articulation of „Antiquity as a dream“ on notions of progress and resistance is certainly more historically engaging than the notion of revival adopted in Houston. Imposed on the works of art, this construct proved no less reductive a vision of the so-called *retour à l'antique*. One problem seems to have been the lopsided conception of novelty at the heart of a modernist vision that stacked the art historical cards to the advantage of French painting. Such chauvinism succeeded in making a strong impression at *The Age of Neoclassicism* show in

London in 1972, when David won over Antonio Canova as leader of the pack, but nearly forty years later this strategy falls flat. The first half of the recent exhibition reached a climax with Fragonard's *Corésus and Callirhoé* (n° 72; Salon of 1765, Louvre) and the second with David's *Oath of the Horatii* (n° 145; Salon of 1785, Louvre). Rehearsing a late-20<sup>th</sup> creed, it presented the partisans of the antique as agents of progress as they overpower other contemporary artistic trials and experiments. It was a truism in David's time that his *Oath of the Horatii* possessed an unprecedented visual and critical force, but a negative consequence was also acknowledged (and until recently mostly forgotten), that the price of its success was closure, at least temporarily, of a range of options with a future. These include the painting of modern and contemporary history, the hybridity of established genres, and the expression of a literary sentimentalism, positively reappraised by feminist art history, that assuaged the ill-effects of male cultural domination.

Neither notions of progress nor resistance indeed appear decisive with regard to the little-known work of monumental sculpture installed in the rotunda preceding the start to the exhibition, an antique *Perseus* unearthed in 1729 and restored by Lambert-Sigisbert Adam around 1740 (n° 1, *fig. 1*; Paris, Palais du Luxembourg). The figure looks unmistakably antique and yet the challenge of naturalism was manifestly foremost in the sculptor's mind. This is evidenced by the treatment of body parts added by Adam to complete the initial fragment and more generally by his fascination for the capacity of marble to create the effects of stone, earth, water, coral, metal, cloth and skin. The expressive head of Medusa at the foot of the figure, closely based on Bernini models, is the key contemporary element of the statue and an exercise in virtuoso carving. It brought to mind the many studies underlining the central importance of the Antique for the 17<sup>th</sup>-century sculptor, long before neoclassicism is ever charted. This eclectic manner of negotiation of styles and sources during the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, relatively sidelined in neoclassical studies, reveals itself to postmodern



**Fig. 2** Christophe Gabriel Allegrain, *Baigneuse*, 1767. Paris, Louvre (Kat.nr. 99)

eyes today to be exceptionally creative. Though the dominant theoretical drive of the period encouraged imitation of the Antique, refusal to pretend to be part of the same culture or age always remained a prevalent attitude among artists.

**T**he reference to Bernini establishes a link with the most problematic, though not the least suggestive section of the exhibition, labeled *Les résistances 1760-1790*. It treated three so-called *contre-courants* that were purported to temper the passion for the Antique in the later 18<sup>th</sup> century: the Neo-Baroque, Neo-Mannerism and the Sublime. The invention of two stylistic categories, based on earlier categories that in themselves are ill-defined, in order to contain works of art that visibly have

little in common, turns out to have been a misguided move. Criticism of the Antique for its coldness and inertness was as much a commonplace after 1730 as that of the artificiality of the *manière* today labeled rococo. Christophe Gabriel Allegrain's *Bather* of 1767 (n° 99, fig. 2; Louvre), predicated on the sophisticated art of Giambologna, suggests that 16<sup>th</sup>-century models offered artists a way to preserve the refinement and sensuality of the rococo, without rejecting the tradition of the great masters. The lessons of Rubens and other 17<sup>th</sup>-century painters were never forgotten by those

artists who sought to give dramatic expression to their work such as Gabriel-François Doyen, represented only by a drawing (n° 75). His œuvre attests to the practice of invoking different traditions when representing a Christian miracle and an ancient heroine. It may be true that „le public finit par se lasser de ses grandes compositions“ (cat., 64), but his panoramic vision reminiscent of Roman narrative reliefs was taken up by a younger generation of painters across Europe. Like some novelists that Rousseau decried as the „*énergumènes de la sensibilité*“, many artists

were irresistibly drawn to the depiction of the most intense manifestations of human emotion and natural grandeur. But against the flow of its proposed argument, the exhibition demonstrated that they explored the iconography of the sublime less to resist the burden of the Antique than to throw off the damper put on the arts by Winckelmann and Anton Raphael Mengs. Among artists who follow this path pointing in the direction of romanticism, expression of individual personality prevails.



**Fig. 3 Jacques-Louis David, *Psyché abandonnée*, 1795. Privatbesitz (Kat.nr. 157)**

### NEOCLASSICAL ICONS

Is the familiar narrative of an exhibition which opens with a rococo mythology by Boucher and concludes with David's neoclassical icon, *The Oath of the Horatii*, still persuasive one hundred years after Jean Locquin set up this textbook dualism (cf. *La peinture d'histoire en France de 1747 à 1785: Etude sur l'évolution des idées artistiques dans la seconde moitié du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris 1912)? Wholesale statements about iconographical shift, stylistic evolution and esthetic motivation are useful to introduce neoclassicism as a broad cultural phenomenon, but they sound surprisingly hollow when illustrated by works as complex and hybrid as those in the show. It is illuminating to see the bust à l'antique of *Philipp von Stosch* carved by Bouchardon (n° 5; 1727, Berlin, Bode Museum) paired with that of a Roman emperor (n° 6), not because the two are so similar as stressed in the catalogue, but because of the unmistakable difference of conception and formal vision. The quick movement given to the head by Bouchardon, the sensuous animation of the locks of hair, thick and disorderly, the surfacing of veins and wrinkles across the face, the deep incision of the eyes, the expressive nose, and the deceptive softness of the drapery all attest to an 18<sup>th</sup>-century esthetic of naturalism alien to the brittle manner and synthetic vision displayed by the author of the *Antique* with which it is compared.

The last section of the catalogue, *Neoclassicimes 1770-1790*, opens by claiming that during this period „la référence à l'antique s'installa durablement auprès de la majorité des créateurs européens“ (368). How was it possible then that David and his entourage in 1788 agreed that the French School of painting was not inspired by „cet enthousiasme pour la simplicité antique, pour le beau idéal, pour le grandioso des Italiens“ which was for them the index of artistic perfection? They observed that even some good-spirited and talented professors of the Royal Academy „regardaient l'admiration pour l'antique comme un fanatisme convenu, & le beau idéal comme une chimère plus propre à égarer les élèves qu'à les guider“ (quoted from the obituary of Jean-Germain Drouais in: *L'Esprit des journaux*, June 1788, 263).

Among the thematic sequences in the exhibition, the one devoted to the excitement provoked in 1757 by the rediscovery of Poussin's *Testament of Eudamidas*, based on a seminal study by Richard Verdi published in 1971 (in: *The Burlington magazine* 113), is one of the most visually eloquent. Juxtaposed were the original painting, an antique relief, and several paintings and drawings originating from several countries. The development of neo-Poussinism – a term not in the catalogue but employed by Verdi – is related to the history paintings produced in the 1780s, but essentially in terms of style. How reference to the 17<sup>th</sup>-century artist took on explicit ideological and political connotations and inspired novel celebratory initiatives during the same period, has been recently treated in depth by Erika Naginski (*Sculpture and Enlightenment*, Los Angeles 2009, „Sculpture and *Polemos*“, 163-216).

### NEOCLASSICISM AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON

The more one takes in the multifarious works of art that might qualify as neoclassical and the differences in attitude toward Antiquity they document, the more uncertain one's convictions become as to when, how and why its visual models impacted art practice during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Like most cultural phenomena, neoclassicism is not easy to pin down. The invocation of Antiquity during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the arts was determined by a history of earlier practices and its development was erratic and unpredictable. Given the historical conditions offered by the Enlightenment, many of its manifestations were able to emerge as vectors of highly personal artistic projects. Affirmation of taste for the Antique was indeed a means of esthetic and moral positioning but rarely without sociopolitical objectives. It was not just a dream but a determined strategy, built on direct confrontation with a hoard of artifacts, held up to study, speculation (both philosophical and financial), consumption and desire. Though the advocates of neoclassicism preached in favor of an artistic ideal that ignored geographical boundaries, in practice the norm was



Fig. 4 François Boucher, L'Enlèvement d'Europe, 1747. Paris, Louvre [Kat.nr. 2]

a grafting process onto local forms and systems. Scholars have shown that national and regional developments were harbored under the cover of a common *élan* and that over succeeding generations distinct claims were made by artists who integrated the repertoire of classical motifs into their work. As students of the Enlightenment know well, coming to terms with such an unsettled history requires a sense of purpose and direction to steer a course, especially when giving order to an exhibition since practical matters of budget, loans and installation space constantly threaten to disable the intended demonstration.

In Marc Fumaroli's leading essay, rather desultory and reminiscent of belles-lettres musings

on art, there is an illuminating suggestion that regrettably is ignored in the construct of the show: that the genesis of European neoclassicism requires a closer look at the art and culture of the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century. Francis Haskell had encouraged him to develop this point a few years earlier (*Caylus, mécène du roi. Collectionner les antiquités au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris 2002/03, 13). To unravel this complementary history however, it is unnecessary to follow Fumaroli and put one's faith only in the „amateurs raffinés et responsables“ of the period (cat., 26). At the beginning of the century many artists, for example, were still pursuing the ideals of a classicism customized for court and church. In his

contribution to the catalogue, Thomas Gaehtgens writes that the sole objective of the exhibition was to question „la modernité de la réception et de l'appropriation de l'Antiquité dans les décennies précédant 1800“ (66), and it is evident that two separate chronologies of the subject drove the project. A further irresolution in the catalogue is the variable degree of emphasis on iconography and on style as the paradigmatic level at which the art interacts with the Antique.

Such dichotomies of opinion, like the conceptual dilemmas previously mentioned, are in fact productive, insofar as they engage historical interpretation. A further example concerns the art of Mengs, whose *Parnassus* ceiling at the Villa Albani in Rome (1761) is qualified by Fumaroli as „plus que médiocre“ (38), whereas Guillaume Faroult considers it visualizes the esthetic vision of Winckelmann „brillamment“ (221). Two drawings exhibited, *Greek Dancer* and *Epictetus* (n° 21-22; Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle), related to lost paintings commissioned by a Parisian patron in 1754 and discussed in Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire* in 1756, suggested to the visitor that the influence of Mengs's work on French contemporaries was probably quite pervasive (the full study is by Steffi Röttgen, „L'interprétation idéaliste du Bonheur. Une commission romaine du marquis de Croismare“, in: *Winckelmann: la naissance de l'histoire de l'art à l'époque des Lumières*, Paris 1991, 161-194).

The contrast between the careful documentation of the individual entries and the shaky structure of the project as a whole, characteristic of a number of recent Louvre exhibitions, is a problem, as is the token inclusion of architecture, the decorative arts, and painting and sculpture from outside of France, especially Italy, suggested by some random publications. Notwithstanding the resulting impression of skimming on the surface of the subject, a singularly conservative vision of art history and history was also felt during the visit. The timeliness of its official expression by France's most prestigious museum

institution will not fail to intrigue future historiographers. There were two related aspects to this assessment. The exhibition exemplifies how art history conceived essentially as a history of style and of ideas inevitably leads to an interpretative deadlock. Fumaroli's vision of the halcyon days of the Ancien Régime is well-known: „Pour quiconque est un peu familier avec les correspondances, journaux et mémoires de l'époque, de haut en bas de l'échelle sociale, un air de liberté et gâité l'emporte, malgré un régime arbitraire dans les détails, mais doux et incontesté en son principe“ (*Caylus mécène du roi*, 15). If one agrees to this static view of history from above, there is indeed no need to factor the politics of the Enlightenment and the Revolution.

Interpreting David's *Psyche abandoned* (n° 157, fig. 3; 1795, private collection) in terms of an atemporal human condition with no reference to the experience of the Terror is symptomatic. Such historical anesthesia, indeed „Antiquity as a dream“, is surprising on the part of an institution created during the Terror with a civic agenda. Although David's sadistic image of *Psyche* and Johann Heinrich Füssli's *Nightmare* (n° 110; Royal Academy 1782, Detroit, Institute of Arts) served prominently to publicize the show, another form of repression was manifest in the desexualized response to the exhibits, a puritanical position hardly tenable after the persuasive argumentation elaborated over the years by Régis Michel, Alex Potts, Thomas Crow, Mechthild Fend and many others. From accounts by travelers, artists and theorists, it is known that antique sculpture released an erotic relation to the body that academic study of the nude model in the studio had managed to keep under wraps. How this played out during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the arts is a central question, though admittedly not an easy one to address.

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**PROF. DR. PHILIPPE BORDES**  
 Professeur d'histoire de l'art moderne,  
 Université Lyon 2, 18 quai Claude-Bernard,  
 F-69365 Lyon cedex 07,  
 Philippe.Bordes@univ-lyon2.fr