

**Laurence Shafe, Birkbeck BA History of Art, Art and Society in the Nineteenth Century, Year 2**

**Discuss the functions of the academy of art in nineteenth-century France.**

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In 1815 the functions of the new Fine Arts Class of the *Institut National* were clearly defined,

*"It follows the progress of its pupils attentively and with material solicitude, observing the course of instruction and the effectiveness of inducements to emulation. It amends and corrects those matters that fall within its provinces; it cautions or requests help from the governmental authority, to which it owes many benefits in the field of art."<sup>1</sup>*

I intend to show that the real function of the *Institut* was unspoken but well understood, namely to preserve the status quo during a period when art had important political ramifications. It achieved this through a strict hierarchical training system that controlled entry to the Prix de Rome and the Salon and through these, life as a successful artist. The Romantics and later the avant garde subverted this system, particularly through their use of the sketch (*étude*) and their approach to originality. I will illustrate some of these points through the use of the landscape genre. As Belting says,

*In the nineteenth century the artist went out into the open air in order to see nature differently from the way it had been handed down to him by a canon or a workshop tradition."<sup>2</sup>*

The academy reinforced this "canon of tradition" and therefore stood in opposition to the avant garde artist. I do not want to imply that subverting the *Institut* was the primary goal of the avant garde artist or that the use of the sketch and painting in the open air were unusual. It was the way in which these were used that furthered the aims of the avant garde and their radical social and political views.

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<sup>1</sup> Boime (1971), page 5

<sup>2</sup> Hans Belting *The End of the History of Art?*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, page 24

In order to understand the function of an art academy one must first consider the political purpose the state thought it would serve. During the eighteenth century European states saw that an important role for art was to improve their international status and so academies were created to control the standard and subject matter of art in order to enhance their international reputation.<sup>3</sup> Across Europe these standards were agreed to be the superiority of morally elevating history painting, the desirability of a 'grand style' and the precedence of design over colour.<sup>4</sup> But as the nineteenth century developed it could be argued that the academies "became the last bastions of absolute standards of beauty."<sup>5</sup> Between 1855 and 1875 the "status of history painting declined precipitously in Europe"<sup>6</sup> and as Eisenman points out, this freed painters from academic regulations allowing them to focus on modernity and take a predominantly masculine stance which was often one of heroic individualism.

The public function and history of the French Academy are well documented in Boime<sup>7</sup>. In summary, the function of the academy was divided between two organisations, the *Institut* (which regained its *Académie* designation in 1816), which gave status and employment to the powerful academicians and the *École* which did the actual training. The professors at the *École* were appointed by the academicians until 1863 when it gained independence.

The *Académie* resisted many artistic and social developments, for example, no women were allowed in the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* throughout the nineteenth century<sup>8</sup> (there were seven women members in 1682 but this was a temporary state of affairs)<sup>9</sup>. The history of the function and role of the *Académie* during the nineteenth century is one of increasing isolation from the

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<sup>3</sup> For a fuller discussion of these issues see M. Craske *Art in Europe 1700-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), page 131

<sup>4</sup> Summarised from Craske (1977), page 134

<sup>5</sup> Craske (1997), page 137

<sup>6</sup> Quote taken from and rest of sentence summarised from S. Eisenman, *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002, first published 1994), page 269

<sup>7</sup> A. Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Phaidon Press, 1971)

<sup>8</sup> T. Garb, Gender and Representation in F. Frascina (ed.), *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 1994), pages 219-290, page 235

'modern world' and the developments in the art world and art market. In order to understand why it became isolated we must first briefly consider the early history of the *Académie* to understand its power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The French *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* was founded in 1648 with the function "to convey the principles of Art to its members by means of lectures, and to impart instruction to its students by means of life-courses."<sup>10</sup> This worthy pedagogic function leaves unsaid the absolute control the *Académie* had over the art world. From 1655 they had a monopoly on the life course, a centre-piece of the educational programme.<sup>11</sup> Within two years all privileged painters of the court were ordered to join, thus establishing a dictatorship.<sup>12</sup> The aim was to train in one particular style, that of the King and Court.<sup>13</sup>

In 1793 this and the other four academies were abolished as they were seen to represent the *ancien-régime*. After the Revolution, the former *Académie's* roles were split into the administrative, handled by the *Institut National* and the teaching handled by *L'École des Beaux-Arts*<sup>14</sup>. However, in practice little changed as the Class of Fine Arts (part of the *Institut National*) recruited professors for the *École des Beaux Arts* from its own ranks and in 1816 the *ancien-régime* accolade "*Académie*" was restored to the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*. Only in 1863 did the government create an independent mechanism for administering the *École*.<sup>15</sup> The term *Académie* will be used here to refer to the various government sponsored bodies responsible for the Fine Arts during the nineteenth century.

*The Institut National was created with three classes each with a number of sections. Arts with literature formed the Third Class of the Institut and in 1803 Fine Arts were given*

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<sup>9</sup> W. Chadwick *Women, Art and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), page 143

<sup>10</sup> N. Pevsner, *Academies of Art, Past and Present* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), page 85

<sup>11</sup> Pevsner (1973), page 87

<sup>12</sup> Pevsner (1973), page 88

<sup>13</sup> Pevsner (1973), page 91

<sup>14</sup> A. Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Phaidon Press, 1971), page 15

<sup>15</sup> Boime (1971), page 7

*independent class status and in 1815 this class was expanded to five sections.*<sup>16</sup>

These functions operated within the roles it provided including a teaching role, the maintenance of art standards, giving lectures, judging works of art, awarding prizes, holding a Salon to exhibit works of art and administering its affairs and its funds. These functions and roles emphasize the pedagogical but they should not be seen in isolation from its function as a tool of the state used to control and direct art in ways that supported the state's aims. This can be seen, for example, in the way the state made sure that the winners of the *Prix de Rome* went to Rome to copy the best Italian art in order to bring it back to France. This does not mean the *Académie* and the state were always in agreement; in fact by the time of the July Monarchy (1830) and then the Second Republic (1848), both of which tried to appeal to the public and popular opinion, the *Académie* and the state were often in disagreement.

The function of the *Académie* is best understood in terms of its teaching methods, its prizes, the Salon and its role within the art world. Art teaching was based on learning from Antiquity and the grand masters of the Renaissance. Art teaching was split between the *École des Beaux Arts* which taught drawing, perspective, geometry and mathematics and the ateliers which taught basic drawing skills and painting. In addition, local colleges taught students enough for them to be accepted into an atelier.

Each year the *Académie* awarded prizes and the *Prix-de-Rome* was the most prestigious. The *Prix-de-Rome* was open to artists who had presented a letter of support from a well-known art teacher, were of French nationality, male, single, under 30, and had passed the admission exams for the school<sup>17</sup>. The *Prix-de-Rome* was held in the highest regard and was the focus of all art training. In order to win the prize the student would engage in a three stage knock-out selection process consisting of drawing, producing an *étude* and then

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<sup>16</sup> Boime (1971), page 5

<sup>17</sup> The French Government's website for the l' École nationale supérieure des Beaux-arts (ENSBA) describes the Prix de Rome competition, M-L Rydman, 'The Prix de Rome Contests in Painting', Thu Apr 18 19:43:13 MDT 1996, at <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/ENSBA/ensba.html> (date of access 10 October 2004)

a finished painting based on the study. Progress through the atelier was based on success at each stage and as students had to be recommended by their master in order to take part discipline was strict. In this way art teaching was part of an institutionalized, rigid, competitive hierarchy which had the *Prix-de-Rome* at the top.

Any student that won the *Prix-de-Rome* had their artistic ability confirmed and his artistic career guaranteed. He would be able to gain commissions and open an atelier and could even become an academician. The *Prix-de-Rome* enabled a student to study at the *Académie de France à Rome* for three to five years, study antiquity, copy Italian works of art to be sent back to Paris and generally to consolidate the intensive and rigorous training they had already received.

Despite the hold this gave the *Académie* over the art world even by the beginning of the nineteenth century there was widespread anti-academic feeling and cartoons making fun of academic opinion were common. This caused groups of artists, such as the *Barbus* ("the bearded ones") in Paris to take extreme positions. "As a matter of policy they set out to produce little or nothing that could be understood or enjoyed by the public"<sup>18</sup>. However, to change the academic establishment required a more prolonged campaign that engaged more intimately with the processes of the academic tradition.

The function of the *Académie* was tied up with art education and the ateliers. At an atelier the student first had to learn to draw and this took place in three stages, copying engravings, copying the *bosse* (casts) and finally copying from live models. The student could not progress from one stage to the next until the *patron* approved and it could take from months to many years at each stage.

In order to understand the battle lines and the development of modern movements such as the Romantics, Barbizon School, Realists and Impressionists, it is first necessary to understand certain aspects of the teaching

practices in more detail, in particular the role of the *étude* and the *facture* of the painting.

The importance of the sketch was stressed throughout the instruction but the sketch was never regarded as a finished work (*fini*). There were different types of sketch. The *ébauche* was the preliminary base of the finished work whereas the *étude* was a sketch, usually in a smaller format that served as a guide to the composition of the final painting. Early, often just outline sketches were known as *croquis*. The final stage of training was painting and the highest genre of painting was the history painting. This consisted of a morally uplifting theme drawn from mythology or the bible and painted with a perfect surface finish (*facture*).

The quest for originality became an obsession in the early part of the nineteenth century, perhaps because of the emphasis the Revolution put on individual freedom<sup>19</sup>. Both the academicians and independent Romantic artists strove for originality but this meant a different thing to each group. Academicians viewed originality as something that could be achieved through the intellect and a lifetime of learning the correct techniques whereas the Romantics viewed originality as something one was born with and something that reflected one's subjective vision. The difference was fundamental and created an unbridgeable gap that split the art world further and further apart. A new style called the *juste milieu* (the middle way) developed during the reign of Louis-Philippe and was favoured by the government as it seemed to patch over the difference between the rigid academicians and the innovative Romantics.

The Romantics had long seen the sketch as more spontaneous and fresh and as it could be produced more quickly their output increased<sup>20</sup>. The popularity of the sketch increased at the same time as the development of the landscape painting. This genre became important as it was seen to be significant by the academicians because of the work of Claude and Poussin in the

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<sup>18</sup> Matthew Craske, *Art in Europe 1700-1830*, pp44-48

<sup>19</sup> Boime (1971), page 9

<sup>20</sup> Boime (1971), page 8

seventeenth century and because of the further development by Valenciennes<sup>21</sup> and others. The independent artists associated the landscape with Romantic concepts of the Beautiful, the Sublime and the Picturesque.<sup>22</sup> In 1816 a Prix-de-Rome was established for landscape<sup>23</sup> and until it was abolished in 1863 it was one of the battlegrounds over which the future of art was fought between the academicians and the independent artists.

The conventional and firmly held academic view was that in order to be displayed a painting had to exhibit an appropriate level of detail in the key areas and it had to have all trace of the painting process eliminated. This was a difficult and time-consuming procedure that required years of specialist training and for which there was no shortcut. For the academician a properly finished painting was not just aesthetically correct but morally correct as it demonstrated the care and duty required of all true artists.<sup>24</sup> The breaking of this smooth, polished academic *facture* into *taches* (patches) of paint symbolized the breaking of the academic stranglehold on art.

The Romantics valued the *étude* as a finished work of art in its own right. This enabled them to be criticized for taking the easy route, simply saving time in order to create more paintings a year and thus increase their income. The *étude* was also more difficult to judge and accidents of production could enable a poor artist to produce attractive work.

By the 1830s the Romantic Movement had ceased to be outrageous and was seen as an alternative style by the public<sup>25</sup>. In 1831 Louis Philippe opened the first of the public annual Salons<sup>26</sup> and the public started to play an increasingly important role in the development of artistic tendencies.<sup>27</sup> The

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<sup>21</sup> Boime (1971), page 136

<sup>22</sup> W. Vaughan, *Romanticism and Art* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1995), pages 32-39

<sup>23</sup> Boime (1971), page 8

<sup>24</sup> Boime (1971), page 9

<sup>25</sup> Boime (1971), page 14

<sup>26</sup> Boime (1971), page 14

<sup>27</sup> Boime (1971), page 14

public demanded art they could understand at a glance and which was new and modern.<sup>28</sup>

The rapid production of an *etude* had been associated with painting in the open air for many years but in the 1860s Corot, the Barbizon painters and Rosa Bonheur further developed the technique which had a direct impact on the beginnings of Impressionism. There was minimal reference to conventions of composition or to the art of the past and as Jules Breton said, "Each day Nature revealed new secrets to us."<sup>29</sup>

The previously referred to disagreements between the *Académie* and the state reached a climax in 1863 when Napoleon III responded to public pressure by insisting that a *Salon des Refusés* be opened, an event that with hindsight was a turning point for modern art. The landscape was eliminated from the *Prix-de-Rome*<sup>30</sup> that year but by that stage the *Académie* had already lost the battle to control the art world. "The eclipse of the history painting by the landscape painting, in effect signaling one of the more important transformations in nineteenth century artistic practice."<sup>31</sup>

In the same year *Le Déjeuner sur L'Herbe* by Manet was rejected by the Salon jury and was shown at the *Salon des Refusés* to the disapproval of critics and public alike. This painting and Olympia, painted in the same year but first shown publicly in the official Salon of 1865, represent the start of modern art and the beginning of the end of the absolute power of the *Académie*.

The landscape divided the academician from the independent artist in terms of the theme, the role of the *étude*, the importance of *facture* and the concept of 'originality'. The reduction in the influence of the *Académie* can be plotted against the rise of the painterly landscape representing everyday life as a popular subject.

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<sup>28</sup> Boime (1971), page 14

<sup>29</sup> J. Milner, *The Studios of Paris: The Capital of Art in the Late Nineteenth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 1988), page 40

<sup>30</sup> Boime (1971), page 146

<sup>31</sup> B. Lukacher, 'Nature Historicized: Constable, Turner, and Romantic Landscape Painting' in S.

As stated, the political function of the *Académie* was to maintain the status quo by means of a rigid pedagogical system and control over the status of artists and therefore their livelihood. The history of the *Académie* has been long and involved but during the nineteenth century it lost its power as a result of political and social developments and its failure to respond appropriately. However, the *Académie's* refusal or inability to change can be seen, perversely, as helping to create modern art. "The surviving artistic bureaucracies of the old regime...came increasingly to be seen as fossils."<sup>32</sup>

To revise Karl Marx, "The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing [*artistic styles*]<sup>33</sup> ...and with them the whole relations of society...All that is solid melts into air, all that is sacred is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober sense, his real conditions of life and relations of his kind."<sup>34</sup>

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Eisenman (ed.), *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), pages 143-159 and page 143

<sup>32</sup> S. Eisenman, *Nineteenth Century Art* (2002), Page 333

<sup>33</sup> In the original "the instruments of production"

<sup>34</sup> Karl Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848*, Penguin in association with New Left Review, London, 1973, pages 70-71

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