

# Ducreux's Yawning : Attention, Sensation and the Ambiguity of Affect

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In August 1783, visitors to the Salon de la Correspondance found themselves confronted with a painting that seemingly stood in stark contrast to the astonishing objects, *naturalia*, and curiosities that must have surrounded it. The visitors could see a man depicted in front of a monochrome background, yawning widely, stretching his arms out and clenching his hands into fists. This figure sports a red coat, a brown vest – worn carelessly – and a white nightcap (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The person portrayed life-size, seen slightly from below, peers out of the picture at the viewers with half-closed eyes. When examining this particular work, which Joseph Ducreux exhibited at the age of 48 at the Salon initiated by Pahin de La Blancherie,<sup>2</sup> a number of questions arise, which I shall deal with in the following text.

It is the artist himself who is portrayed here in one of the first of his many expression studies which have been the subject of art history debates on several occasions, though rarely discussed in detail.<sup>3</sup> The *Bâilleur*'s special significance within this series will be highlighted in the subsequent analyses. After Cornelia Logemann's and Ulrich Pfisterer's recent study of the work,<sup>4</sup> I will deepen some aspects of their argumentation. Following the authors' general thesis about Ducreux's critical approach toward academic institutions and the Salon in particular, I would like to argue for a differentiated terminological discussion

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1 The painting discussed here, now displayed at the Getty Museum, is the same one which was exhibited at the Salon de la Correspondance in 1783. Another version of *Le Bâilleur* was painted in 1793. It was most likely auctioned at Drouot in Paris in 1984. Its whereabouts now are unknown. Cf. Claudia Denk, *Artiste, citoyen & philosophe. Der Künstler und sein Bildnis im Zeitalter der französischen Aufklärung*, Munich, 1994, p. 201; Cornelia Logemann and Ulrich Pfisterer, "Kunst zum Gähnen! Joseph Ducreux' Selbstporträts", in Maria Effinger et al. (Eds.), *Von analogen und digitalen Zugängen zur Kunst. Festschrift für Hubertus Kohle zum 60. Geburtstag*, Heidelberg, 2019, pp. 131–139, here p. 133.

2 Cf. Charlotte Guichard, "Is the Love of Art a Form of the Passion for Equality? The Arts Worlds Tested by the French Revolution", in *Arts & Sociétés*, #47 (no date), URL: <https://www.sciencespo.fr/artsetsocietes/en/archives/1550> [accessed: 06.03.2024]; Laura Auricchio, "Pahin de la Blancherie's Commercial Cabinet of Curiosity (1779–1787)", in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 36/1, 2002, pp. 47–61, here p. 48.

3 I would like to highlight Claudia Denk's extensive reading of Ducreux's paintings within the context of enlightened portraiture and the expression of the passions. Cf. Denk, 1994 (note 1), pp. 198–207. However, it should, at this point, be emphasised that the relatively low level of research interest is also due to the fact that the provenance of many of the Ducreux paintings has not yet been clarified.

4 Cf. Logemann / Pfisterer, 2019 (note 1), pp. 131–139.



- 1 Joseph Ducreux, *Le Bâilleur* (Self-Portrait, Yawning), by 1783, oil on canvas, 117.8 × 90.8 cm, Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum

of the painting, focusing on the sensory experience, which plays a major role in contemporary discourses. For the image of a person yawning in particular, it is important to question the ambivalence of facial expressions in works of art. Ducreux seems to reflect on the indiscernibility of yawning and screaming in the silent medium of painting. In my reading, it is especially this oscillation between different expressions that questions traditional academic standards within the hierarchy of high and low genres. Jürgen Müller already postulated a similar understanding of yawning as a subversive act for Pieter Bruegel's *Yawning Man* (after 1566). In Müller's reading, Bruegel's small-format painting mocked his contemporaries' uncritical imitation of Italian history painting and deliberately reversed the high and the low.<sup>5</sup> For the example discussed in this paper, it is important to understand the context of the exhibition at the Salon de la Correspondance: how does institutional critique that is painted function outside of academic institutions? Furthermore, addressing the following question seems crucial to me: are we, in this case, dealing with an expression study in the proper sense at all? Yawning has never been part of any of the widespread writings on the passions. It could also be described as a bodily reflex. In this sense also, Ducreux's painting seems to be in opposition to the traditional art-theoretical formulations of his time. The deliberate use of ambiguity – as I will show at the end of my analysis – could also be related directly to contemporary sensationist theories (*sensualisme*).<sup>6</sup>

To begin with, I will introduce the painting as having been a shrewd commentary on the principle of attention in art exhibitions of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, the painter's yawning pose, which is commonly understood as a sign of boredom, is intended to create tension with an important group of aesthetic concepts.

### Engaging attention through wit

With this self-portrait, Ducreux definitely attracted attention. Without going into too much detail, it should be pointed out that terms like *maraviglia*, *stupore*, *curiosità* or *attenzione* already played an important role in Italian Renaissance philosophy and art theory. This terminology, which is used in Alberti's *De pictura* (1435),<sup>7</sup> is taken up by Giorgio Vasari in his preface to the second part of his *Vite* (1550). There, he describes boredom as the deadly

5 Cf. Jürgen Müller, "Vorsicht ansteckend! Pieter Bruegels d. Ä. *Der gähnende Mann*. (K)eine Bagatelle", in *In aller Munde. Das Orale in Kunst und Kultur*, Uta Ruhkamp (Ed.), exh. cat., Wolfsburg, Kunstmuseum, 2020, pp. 112–117.

6 Following John O'Neal's terminology, I have decided to use the term 'sensationism' as the proper equivalent to French *sensualisme*. Cf. John C. O'Neal, *The Authority of Experience. Sensationist Theory in the French Enlightenment*, Pennsylvania State University, 1996, p. 1.

7 Cf. Leon Battista Alberti, *Della Pittura. Über die Malkunst*, (ed. by Oskar Bätschmann and Sandra Gianfreda), Darmstadt, 2002, p. 132. As is well known, Alberti recommends a mediator who draws the viewer's attention to what is happening in the picture.

enemy of attention: “il tedio e la lunghezza, mortal nemica dell’attenzione”.<sup>8</sup> A ‘good painter’ should enthrall and affect the recipients in order to secure their prolonged attention.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, for Vasari and later for Descartes, attention and related terms such as curiosity or amazement – when they appear in excess – already had morally negative connotations.<sup>10</sup>

Although scholars of the 18<sup>th</sup> century did not produce a complete theory of the term, Blaise Pascal had already thought about a previously unheard-of productive interlocking of diversion and attention.<sup>11</sup> In this understanding, which can only be roughly outlined here, diversion (in the sense of variety) becomes a consolation for the *philosophe*’s mental anguish. *Divertissement*, on the other hand, is condemned by Pascal as the “root of all evil”,<sup>12</sup> as Søren Kierkegaard would formulate it centuries later, referring to boredom – a term yet unknown to Pascal.<sup>13</sup> But even *divertissement* was upgraded in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Etienne Bonnot de Condillac included the parameter ‘time’ into his calculation of distraction, attention, and knowledge in his *Traité des Sensations* (1754). In her book on the media history of distraction, Petra Löffler states that in Condillac’s theory and for his followers, attention and distraction are only separated by a certain amount of time, a moment in which one state changes into another. It is precisely this transition that makes it impossible to clearly differentiate between them. Distraction becomes a function of attention.<sup>14</sup>

In this epistemic and aesthetic tradition, sensory perception is highly valued. Other terms also appear repeatedly in the sources. Charlotte Guichard states in her book about *Les Amateurs d’art à Paris au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*: “l’expérience esthétique se construit dans l’intensification du plaisir visuel, que la nouvelle philosophie empirique rend possible grâce à l’attention portée à la source perceptive et à la perception visuelle.”<sup>15</sup> Not least because of John Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding* (1690), which was translated into French in 1700, a focus on the sensory experience develops a process through which knowledge emerges.<sup>16</sup>

8 Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de’ piu eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*, Vol. 3 (ed. by Rosanna Bettarini), Florence, 1997, p. 5. Translation: ‘tedium and length, the mortal enemy of attention’.

9 Cf. Hana Gründler, *Die Dunkelheit der Episteme. Zur Kunst des aufmerksamen Sehens*, Berlin, 2019, p. 83.

10 Cf. René Descartes, *Die Leidenschaften der Seele / Les Passions de l’âme*, (ed. by Klaus Hammacher), Hamburg, 1984, p. 114–115; Lisa Hecht, “Verwunderung und Staunen als Primäraffekte in Poussins, Christus heilt die Blinden”, in *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft*, 46, 2019, pp. 151–165.

11 Cf. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Paris, Éditions Garnier Frères, 1983, pp. 108–115.

12 Søren Kierkegaard, “Either/Or”, in Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Eds.), *Kierkegaard’s Writing*, Vol. 23, Princeton University, 1988, p. 257.

13 For Kierkegaard’s reception of pre-modern concepts of boredom, see: William McDonald, “Kierkegaard’s Demonic Boredom”, in Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani (Eds.), *Essays on Boredom and Modernity*, Amsterdam, New York, 2009, pp. 61–84.

14 Cf. Petra Löffler, *Verteilte Aufmerksamkeit. Eine Mediengeschichte der Zerstreuung*, Zürich, Berlin, 2014, p. 43.

15 Charlotte Guichard, *Les Amateurs d’art à Paris au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Seyssel, 2008, p. 178–179.

16 Guichard, 2008 (note 15), p. 178. For further comments on the reception of Locke’s writings by Condillac, cf. O’Neal, 1996 (note 6), pp. 13–59.



I would like to place particular emphasis on the term *plaisir visuel*. One of the most important sources for this term's use – closely linked to the idea of art as *divertissement* – can already be found in the introduction to Dubos's *Réflexions* (1719).<sup>17</sup> Later sources, for example the writings of the Marquis de Voyer d'Argenson on the works in his collection, suggest that *plaisir* or *jouissance* are important terms that relate to aesthetic sensation and, thus, for the attention of the public.<sup>18</sup> I shall therefore assume that *jouissance* means not only – in the case of the Marquis de Voyer – the joy in describing beloved works or the admiration of *la touche*, the close-up of the painterly surface<sup>19</sup>, but that it could also be understood in the sense of joy in clever allusions, comparable to the English concept of wit.

Wit derives from the ideal of politeness, which, in particular, is representative of skillful conversation. Superficially, it is about the refinement of manners that are nevertheless supposed to appear natural, whereby it is a matter of reverting to early modern concepts, such as *grazia* and *sprezzatura*, formulated by Baldassare Castiglione in his *Libro del Cortegiano* (1528).<sup>20</sup> From the effort to demonstrate sophisticated conversational skills, further thoughts regarding the achievement of such a goal arise. One method is, for example, originality when making allusions: surprising realisations when recognising unforeseen relationships between things or concepts.<sup>21</sup> Conversational wit was also associated with the pictorial arts. The joy of the viewer when recognising similarities is described in Alexander Gerard's *Essay on Taste* (1759): "Similitude is a very powerful principle of association, which, by continually connecting the ideas in which it is found, and leading our thoughts from one of them to the other, produces in mankind a strong tendency to comparison."<sup>22</sup> Werner Busch expanded on this thought in his study of imitation as an artistic principle in Hogarth's oeuvre (1977). He explains that it is even more interesting to go in search of the original just from knowing a copy. When the original is discovered, it evokes joy in one's own ingenuity. The pleasure grows the more difficult the model's discovery becomes.<sup>23</sup>

17 Cf. Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, vol. 1, Paris, 1719, p. 1–2.

18 Cf. Bibliothèque universitaire publique de Poitiers, Fonds d'Argenson, D 475, section IV, fol. 17.

19 Cf. Guichard, 2008, (note 15), p. 183. See also Tocqué's *Conférence* on portrait painting at the Académie royale (1750): Louis Tocqué, "Sur la peinture et le genre du portrait", in Jacqueline Lichtenstein et Christian Michel (Eds.), *Les Conférences au temps de Charles-Antoine Coypel 1747-1752*, Vol. 2, Paris 2012, pp. 448–466, here pp. 456–457. For further information on the *touche* in 18th-century French art theory, cf. Marianne Koos, *Haut, Farbe und Medialität. Oberfläche im Werk von Jean-Étienne Liotard (1702-1789)*, Munich, 2014, pp. 148–191.

20 For the reception of Castiglione's text, cf. Peter Burke, *The Fortunes of the Courtier. The European Reception of Castiglione's 'Cortegiano'*, Pennsylvania 1996.

21 Cf. Werner Busch, *Das sentimentalische Bild. Die Krise der Kunst im 18. Jahrhundert und die Geburt der Moderne*, Munich, 1993, p. 404.

22 Alexander Gerard, *Essay on Taste*, London 1759, p. 49.

23 Cf. Werner Busch, *Nachahmung als bürgerliches Kunstprinzip. Ikonographische Zitate bei Hogarth und seiner Nachfolge*, Hildesheim, 1977, pp. 41–46.

The following analysis will show that Ducreux also worked with several overlapping innuendos in order to transform the first humorous impression of his *Bâilleur* into an intellectual delight. Ducreux's painting appeals to an audience that has already grown used to a concept of art that is not only characterised by gravity and seriousness, but also by joy, wit, *divertissement*, and sensuality. Ducreux's studies in human expression can be understood within this range of terms, both in his painting style, which clearly articulates the surface appearances, as well as in the subjects, which at first glance make the recipient smile.

### The painter as a yawning Democritus

Superficial delight is also reflected within contemporary (public) reception. Unfortunately the painting in question can only be traced on the basis of the entries in *Les Nouvelles de la République des lettres et des arts*, which appeared in the context of La Blancherie's exhibitions. In addition to the subject's factual description on the 20th of August 1783,<sup>24</sup> the painting is referred to again on the 10th of December: "N° 20, un homme vêtu de rouge dans l'attitude de bâiller, par M. Ducreux, peintre. On en aime la chaleur, la couleur et l'expression."<sup>25</sup> The observer's joy arises primarily through the painterly execution and the expression shown.

The situation is very similar to Maurice-Quentin de La Tour's successful *Autoportrait à l'index*, which he exhibited in 1737 at the first Salon du Louvre.<sup>26</sup> According to Gerrit Walczak, even here – with Ducreux's teacher<sup>27</sup> – it was not necessary to understand the allusion to the laughing philosopher Democritus in order to appreciate the pictorial wit. Addressing the audience alone could be a prerequisite for gaining attention and popularity.<sup>28</sup> The enjoyable subject therefore initially serves as a *divertissement*. After the first smile that Ducreux elicits, his joke's next layer consists in the paradox of attracting attention through an expression of boredom. This once again confirms the Salon as a place of *divertissement*, as it has been viewed repeatedly.<sup>29</sup>

24 Cf. Georgette Lyon, *Joseph Ducreux (1735–1802) Premier peintre de Marie Antoinette. Sa vie – son œuvre*, Paris, 1958, p. 73.

25 Quoted from: *ibid.*, p. 73.

26 Cf. Maurice Quentin de La Tour, *Autoportrait à l'index*, 1737, pastel on paper and canvas, 60 × 49.7 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre (inv. no. RF 54298).

27 For further information on the relationship between Ducreux and his teacher La Tour, see: Neil Jeffares, "DUCREUX, Joseph", in Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of Pastellists Before 1800*, 2006, online edition (URL: <http://www.pastellists.com/Articles/Ducreux.pdf> [accessed: 06.03.2024]).

28 Cf. Gerrit Walczak, *Bürgerkünstler. Künstler, Staat und Öffentlichkeit im Paris der Aufklärung und Revolution*, Berlin, Munich, 2015, p. 98.

29 Cf. Eva Kernbauer, *Der Platz des Publikums. Modelle für Kunstöffentlichkeit im 18. Jahrhundert*, Cologne, Weimar, 2011, p. 233. The same can be said about the literary salons, cf. Antoine Lilti, *Le Monde des salons. Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 2005, p. 273.

- 2 Joseph Ducreux, *Portrait de l'artiste sous les traits d'un moqueur*, by 1793, oil on canvas, 91.5 × 72.5 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre



Claudia Denk clearly locates Ducreux's *études d'expression* in the succession of La Tour and Liotard.<sup>30</sup> The latter also liked playing the role of the laughing philosopher in his 1770 self-portrait.<sup>31</sup> However, Ducreux only shows himself with a similar pointing gesture later (fig. 2), full of an aggressive bitterness, seeming to laugh at his audience – more in the tradition of Coypel's *Démocrète riant* (1692).<sup>32</sup> To a certain extent, the popular motif of the pointing Democritus refers to the mediating figure demanded preferred by Alberti, which is intended to attract the viewer's attention. However, in Ducreux's self-portrait, attention is shifted away from the picture and back to the viewer's level. The viewers have to pay attention to their own attitudes – that is, to reflect on oneself.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Denk, 1994 (note 1), p. 52.

<sup>31</sup> See Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Liotard riant*, 1770, oil on canvas, 93.2 × 84 cm, Geneva, Musée d'art et d'histoire (inv. no. 1893-0009).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Antoine Coypel, *Démocrète riant*, 1692, oil on canvas, 69 × 57 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre (inv. no. MI 1048).

With his *Bâilleur*, the painter appears in a similar role, though not the same. While Democritus and the *philosophes* who identified with him can only respond to humanity's supposed stupidity with a malicious laugh, Ducreux counters this with a never-ending yawn. Contrary to the expected antithesis to Democritus, which is to be found in the figure of Heraclitus weeping over humanity's irrational assumptions, Ducreux apparently presents a more contemporary philosophical attitude: *l'ennui*.<sup>33</sup> Instead of amusement, he reacts with weariness, fatigue or boredom. As it seems, the sitter does not necessarily react directly to the exhibition's context. Contemporary viewers might instead have thought about a subversion of academic hierarchies and theories.

### Subverting academic standards

The skilful portrayal of human emotions and passions in portraits was one of the genre's most important challenges in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This was emphasised by Louis Tocqué as early as 1750 in his *Conférence sur la peinture et le genre du portrait*. The aspects he admired most about Hyacinthe Rigaud's portraits were their movement and the seemingly physical presence of those portrayed:

Pourquoi m'échauffent-ils toujours lorsque je les regarde ? C'est qu'ils me font illusion, c'est que je crois être en conversation avec ceux qu'ils me représentent. Je vois la toile qui semble respirer. Je vois l'âme peinte sur le visage. Je veux pénétrer ce mystère, je m'approche, je crois apercevoir le sang qui circule sous la peau ; et j'admire en cela l'effet que produisent les beaux passages et la variété des ombres.<sup>34</sup>

In the *Dictionnaire des arts* (1792), Pierre-Charles Lévesque went even further when he placed the portraitist's demands above those of the history painter: "Il semble même que le peintre de portraits doive, à cet égard [la partie de l'expression], éprouver une difficulté de plus que le peintre d'histoire. Astreint au même devoir de rendre l'expression & les formes principales, il est dans la nécessité de rendre avec plus d'exactitude les différences individuelles."<sup>35</sup> To summarise a complex development: in addition to history painting, the expression of the passions thus received a new focus in the evolution of portrait painting during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This was certainly also a consequence of the growing

33 On ennui in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, see, e.g., the classic study by Reinhard Kuhn: Reinhard Kuhn, *The Demon of Noontide. Ennui in Western Literature*, New Jersey, 1976, pp. 101–166. This term's artistic examination is one of the topics of my postdoctoral thesis, which is in the process of being created.

34 Tocqué, 2012 (note 19), pp. 457–460.

35 Lévesque, quoted in Denk, 1994 (note 1), p. 190.



enthusiasm of French collectors for Dutch *tronies*<sup>36</sup> – a development that may also have been significant for the *études d'expression* in Ducreux's œuvre.

Even this evolution in the genre results from signs of fatigue in relation to the reception of portraits in the Salon. In his *Tableau de Paris* (1781), for example, Louis-Sébastien Mercier is tired of the endless rows of nameless portraits that populate the Salon:

Ce qui fatigue & quelquefois révolte, c'est de trouver là une foule de bustes, de portraits d'hommes, sans nom, ou le plus souvent exerçant des emplois antipopulaires. Que nous fait la figure de ces financiers, de ces traitans, de ces premiers ou seconds commis, de ces dolentes marquises [...]. Que le pinceau se vende à l'oisive opulence, à la coquetterie minaudière, à la fatuité hautaine, le portrait peut demeurer dans la salle ou dans le boudoir, mais qu'il ne vienne jamais affronter les regards du public dans un lieu que la nation accourt visiter !<sup>37</sup>

However, as is well known, history painting also suffered a similar fate in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Tournehem's efforts to revive academic history painting in 1749 only met with biting criticism. The exhibited works were described as tiring and irrelevant.<sup>38</sup>

Ducreux's painting can therefore be positioned in a development that, as a logical conclusion, leads to the dissolution of the absolutist art administration. The painter himself was never a member of the Académie royale.<sup>39</sup> Although he proudly called himself "premier peintre de la reine", since he was sponsored as Marie-Antoinette's portraitist,<sup>40</sup> he was only a member of the Académie de Saint-Luc, which was closed in 1776. A certain bitterness on Ducreux's side towards the official art world cannot be ruled out. Still, one should be careful not to make psychological statements about the artist's supposedly difficult character, as was done by Georgette Lyon in the only monograph on the painter in 1958.<sup>41</sup> Rather, the picture itself can provide information that its creator assumes on both of the highest pictorial tasks of academic art: portrait- and history-painting.

Hardly any other place at this time would be more suitable than the Salon de la Correspondance, which does not see itself exactly as competition to the official Salon. However, it provides a far better reflection of the contemporary art market. La Blancherie's Salon

36 Cf. Eik Kahng, "Greuze's The *Dreamer*: Portrait, Tronie, or Fantasy Figure?", in Heather MacDonald (Ed.), *French Art of the Eighteenth Century. The Michael L. Rosenberg Lecture Series at the Dallas Museum of Art*, New Haven, London, 2016, pp. 125–140, here, p. 127.

37 Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, Tome 5, nouvelle édition originale, corrigée & augmentée, Amsterdam 1782–1783, pp. 316–317.

38 Cf. Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, New Haven 1995 [first edition 1987], pp. 12–13.

39 Cf. Lyon, 1958 (note 24), p. 67.

40 Cf. Jeffares, 2006 (note 27).

41 Cf. Lyon, 1958 (note 24), p. 114. Here, Lyon uncritically refers to the Goncourts' psychologising writings on 18<sup>th</sup>-century art.

has already been compared to a “commercial cabinet of curiosity”,<sup>42</sup> since the exhibition was not limited to the pictorial arts. It also displayed current inventions or natural objects. According to Laura Auricchio, the Salon de la Correspondance thus “jeopardized the Academy’s ennobled vision of the fine arts.”<sup>43</sup> At the same time, La Blancherie’s premises served as an alternative exhibiting space for artists who belonged to the Académie de Saint-Luc.<sup>44</sup> The focus of the exhibited artworks was primarily on the supposedly ‘lower’ genres: landscapes, genre-scenes, and also portraits, which dominated a large space in the Collège de Bayeux and later at the Hôtel de Villayer.<sup>45</sup> The audience of the Salon de la Correspondance is difficult to reconstruct. La Blancherie planned an egalitarian forum for encounters and exchanges between scholars and writers, artists and art lovers, to whom the different objects and new publications from all areas of science and art were presented every fortnight.<sup>46</sup> Charlotte Guichard describes the Salon as the “first museum [to open] its doors to the public at large, so that one no longer needed to be coopted or introduced by an existing member as a requirement for admission.”<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that it was certainly not a museum in the modern sense. Even if elitist barriers were dismantled, not everyone had access to these regular meetings of intellectuals.

Both the historical sources and the secondary literature reveal almost no precise information as to the context in which Ducreux’s painting was to be seen. We do not know if it was placed on a wall next to many other works or presented and discussed separately. Therefore, we cannot assess with certainty whether the artist’s yawning relates to the specific exhibition context. It may be assumed that Ducreux’s expressive self-portrait was a general reaction not only to the flood of portraits in the official Salon but also to the art market in general, which was increasingly dominated by a wealthy bourgeoisie striving for public visibility.<sup>48</sup>

Additionally, the work seems to be a reaction to the genre of history painting being no longer up-to-date. The great affect – generally reserved for this highest pictorial genre – is paradoxically turned into the opposite here. The open mouth is known to us from history painting as an expression of the utmost emotional turmoil.<sup>49</sup> While the mouth opening

42 Auricchio, 2002 (note 2), pp. 47–61.

43 Ibid., p. 47.

44 Cf. Walczak, 2015 (note 28), p. 178.

45 Cf. ibid., p. 174 & 179.

46 Cf. ibid., pp. 173–174.

47 Guichard, 2008 (note 15).

48 About the bourgeois ambitions for visibility in an art history context, see Walczak, 2015 (note 28), pp. 100–101.

49 Regarding the ambiguity of the open mouth in the picture, see Lorenz Aggermann, *Der offene Mund. Über ein zentrales Phänomen des Pathischen*, Berlin, 2013, pp. 8–9; Lisa Hecht, “Degas’ gähnende Büglerinnen zwischen Decorumsverstoß und Hysterie”, in Linn Burchert and Iva Rešetar (Eds.), *Atem. Gestalterische, ökologische und soziale Dimensionen / Breath. Morphological, Ecological and Social Dimensions*, Berlin, 2021, pp. 31–46, here pp. 39–40.

into a scream turns the unspeakable into a *Pathosformel*,<sup>50</sup> the yawning mouth – although similar in formal terms – negates the pathos. Although Ducreux adopts a classic pose, as is known from what is probably the most famous *exemplum doloris* – the *Laocoön*<sup>51</sup> – the same gestures and facial expressions become something completely different. The dying priest’s “edle Einfalt und stille Größe”<sup>52</sup> become an expression of utter boredom.<sup>53</sup>

The comparison of these two works makes it possible to delve deeper into Ducreux’s artistic reflection on the representability of human emotions. Firstly, the painting shows how two completely different emotions can appear similar in human expression. We already know this statement from Alberti, who writes in *Della pittura* about the difficulty in distinguishing laughing from weeping: “E chi mai credesse, se non provando, tanto essere difficile, volendo dipingere uno viso che rida, schifare di non lo fare piuttosto piangioso che lieto?”<sup>54</sup> Charles Le Brun, in his *conférence* on *L’expression particulière* (1668), attempted to distinguish between the two affects more clearly by using his schematic representations of the facial muscles.<sup>55</sup> However, it turns out that the ambiguity of some facial expressions remained a virulent theme in the pictorial arts, despite – or perhaps because of – Le Brun’s influential theory.<sup>56</sup> Only the context of an image, it seems, can provide more precise information about the affect we are dealing with.

This becomes especially clear in the most well-known group of works by the sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt: the so-called *Character Heads*<sup>57</sup> (created between around 1770 and 1783). In this series, the former Viennese court artist, whom Ducreux might even have met during his stay in Vienna in 1769,<sup>58</sup> depicts human heads with at times

50 About the scream as a pathetic affect in history painting, see Müller, 2020 (note 5), pp. 115–116.

51 I am speaking of the extremely popular statue group in the Vatican Museums: Hagesandros, Athene-doros, and Polydoros, *Laocoön and his Sons*, early first century B.C.E., marble, height 2.4 m, Rome / Vatican, Vatican Museums (inv. no. 1059).

52 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Gedanken ueber die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerey und Bildhauerkunst, zweite vermehrte Auflage*, Dresden / Leipzig, 1756, p. 21. Translation: ‘a noble simplicity and a quiet grandeur’.

53 Ducreux was probably acquainted first-hand with the bronze version of the statue that Primaticcio crafted for François I<sup>er</sup>, or at least with printed copies of the work. See Francesco Primaticcio (Le Primatice), *Laocoön*, 16<sup>th</sup> century, bronze, height 1.91 m, Fontainebleau, Musée national du château de Fontainebleau (inv. no. MR 3290).

54 Alberti, 2002 (note 6), p. 132. Translation: ‘Who can ever believe, if one has not tried it, how difficult it is to attempt to paint a laughing face, so that it does not look rather weeping than joyous?’.

55 Charles Le Brun, “L’Expression particulière”, in Jacqueline Lichtenstein / Christian Michel (Eds.), *Les Conférences au temps d’Henry Testelin 1648-1681*, vol. 1, Paris, 2006, pp. 260–283, here p. 278.

56 Cf. Thomas Kirchner, “Franz Xaver Messerschmidt and the Construction of Expression”, in *The Fantastic Heads of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt*, Maraike Bückling (Ed.), exh. cat., Frankfurt am Main, Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung, 2006, pp. 266–281, here pp. 270–272.

57 The name of the group of works only became established with their exhibition in 1793. Cf. Maraike Bückling, “Franz Xaver Messerschmidt – Madness, Intrigue and Genius”, in *The Fantastic Heads*, 2006, pp. 30–35, here pp. 31–32.

58 Cf. Logemann / Pfisterer, 2019 (note 1), p. 135–137.

grimacing facial expressions. Among the various busts, a so-called *Yawner* can be found (fig. 3). This tin sculpture's title – like all other *Heads* in the series – only came about after the artist's death, when the curious-looking works were publicly exhibited as a kind of fairground attraction in 1793.<sup>59</sup> So, the question arises of whether Messerschmidt really presents us with a yawner here. Contemporaries almost always seemed to be absolutely sure about this.<sup>60</sup> The shaven male head is characterised by a wide-open mouth and tightly closed eyes. A look into the oral cavity reveals the teeth, the uvula, the palate, and the raised tongue. However, it is the tongue's position in particular that prompted Maraike Bückling, among others, to speak more about the expression of screaming.<sup>61</sup> As with his other *Heads*, Messerschmidt deliberately works with the expression's ambiguity. In Thomas Kirchner's essay on Messerschmidt's possible references to the theory of affects or the contemporary debate on physiognomy, the author has to conclude that none of the theories or comparisons offer a key to the complexity of the sculptor's inventions.<sup>62</sup> Messerschmidt seems to consciously mock theatricality and the accompanying baroque penchant for pathetic affects<sup>63</sup> by immobilising and exaggerating these supposed affects, thereby robbing them of their meaning. Although it cannot be fully clarified whether Ducreux was familiar with Messerschmidt's late oeuvre, it can be stated for both works discussed here that they use the open mouth as a transgressive motif in several respects. Not only is yawning in the silent picture an ambiguous sign which runs the risk of being misinterpreted, but its artistic representation also subverts the early modern understanding of affects.

Strictly speaking, yawning is not even an affect. The open mouth, the raised arms, the clenched fists: all of this in itself might suggest a great display of emotions. However, we recognise, thanks to our viewing habits, that it is actually a bodily reflex that is still puzzling today.<sup>64</sup> Only on the second iconographic level does yawning become the expression of a feeling. This feeling can be fatigue or boredom:<sup>65</sup> neither can be described as regular affects as we know them from history painting. In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, the revaluation of subjective sensory experience and the strengthening of an

59 Cf. Maraike Bückling, "The Character Heads – Forms, Names and Numbers", in *The Fantastic Heads*, 2006, pp. 76–87, here p. 77.

60 See the *Merkwürdige Lebensgeschichte*, quoted from: *Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, 1736–1783*, Michael Krapf (Ed.), exh. cat., Vienna, Barockmuseum of the Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, 2002, cat. 16.

61 Cf. *The Fantastic Heads*, 2006, cat. 12 (Maraike Bückling).

62 Cf. Kirchner, 2006 (note 56), p. 272.

63 Maraike Bückling, "Die Wahrheit des Menschen", in *The Fantastic Heads*, 2006, pp. 213–240, here p. 236–237.

64 For the medical debate about yawning, see: Ronald Baeninger, "On Yawning and its Functions", in *Psychosomatic Bulletin & Review* 4, 1997, pp. 198–207; Francis Schiller, "Yawning?", in *Journal of the History of Neurosciences*, 4/11, 2002, pp. 392–401.

65 Cf. Eran Dorfman, "Everyday Life between Boredom and Fatigue", in Michael E. Gardiner and Julian Jason Haladyn (Eds.), *Boredom Studies Reader. Frameworks and Perspectives*, London / New York, 2017, pp. 180–192; Peter Toohey, *Boredom. A Lively History*, New Haven / London, 2012, p. 11.



3 Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, *Der Gähner* (*The Yawner*), after 1770, tin, height 41 cm, Budapest, Szépművészeti Múzeum



enlightened concept of feeling (*sentiment* / *Gefühl*) meant that contemporary discourse also opened up to feelings that were more reflective in nature.<sup>66</sup> This should also include *ennui* or fatigue.<sup>67</sup>

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as it is today, a work of art in an exhibition was expected to be ‘of interest’. This is precisely what, if we follow contemporary criticism, only a few works in the Salon achieved, which is why Ducreux may have introduced himself programmatically with this deliberate expression of weariness in the Salon de la Correspondance. As Logemann and Pfisterer correctly stated, the painting also differs from the artist’s other expression studies, as well as from the self-portraits of his predecessors La Tour and Liotard, in that there is a double exchange between the image and the audience: the person portrayed reacts to the world facing the picture with a yawn and triggers the same reaction in his viewer, since yawning is known to be contagious.<sup>68</sup> Consequently, we imagine an audience that had to resist a rude yawn, which of course was viewed as extremely unsuitable both in social interaction and in the context of the work of art.<sup>69</sup>

An exacerbation of the chosen pose’s subversive potential results again from the reference that Ducreux makes to the *Laocoön*. Lessing already problematised the dying priest’s eternal cry.<sup>70</sup> In this context, Ducreux’s endless yawn is another clever allusion to the aesthetic discourses of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. To begin with, the view into the oral cavity is inadequate for a painting that corresponds in size and execution to the representative portrait. In addition, freezing what is transitory seems to have two effects: firstly, it is proof of the painter’s ability to portray himself in this pose (the slightly opened eyes reveal the look in the mirror). Secondly, the work challenges common *Pathosformeln* and, at the same time, dissolves the strict separation of high and low. Just as Pahin de La Blancherie’s Salon de la Correspondance questioned the standards of high art and curiosities, Ducreux uses a witty allusion to transform the now obsolete pathos of the Ancien Regime into a late Enlightenment *ennui*.

66 Cf. Jutta Stalfort, *Die Erfindung der Gefühle. Eine Studie über den historischen Wandel menschlicher Emotionalität (1750–1850)*, Bielefeld, 2013, p. 300.

67 For more detailed information on boredom as a phenomenon between ‘discrete emotion’ and existential experience, see Lisa Hecht, *Character, Affect or Grimace? Messerschmidt and the Art of Yawning*, in Silvia Marin (ed.), *Depicting Emotions in Eastern and Central Europe (1200–1900)*, to be released in spring 2024.

68 Cf. Logemann / Pfisterer, 2019 (note 1), p. 134; Müller, 2020 (note 5), p. 114.

69 Cf. Wolf Lepenies, *Melancholie und Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main, 1998 [first edition 1969], p. 56 and pp. 62–63.

70 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Malerey und Poesie*, Berlin, 1766, p. 1.

## Sensationism as a means of decoding Ducreux's ambiguities

The subversion of academic rules and hierarchies is not the definite answer to the question concerning the ambiguity of the 'affect' that Ducreux conveys in his self-portrait. How could learned contemporaries explain whether the artist is showing a screaming or a yawning man? While it is true that the painting provides the audience with clues in the sitter's clothing, it is ultimately our imagination that gives the open mouth an appropriate sound, which in turn disambiguates the pose. This imagination results from the viewer's sensory experience.

18<sup>th</sup>-century sensationism grappled with precisely these considerations. John C. O'Neal summarises the sensationists' crucial argument: "[...] that we cannot know external objects with certainty; all we can know is our relation to them (i.e., our sensation), and that we can achieve progress only after coming to a thorough understanding of the nature of humanity, which was seen as universal."<sup>71</sup> In the following paragraphs, I will use a particularly well-known philosophical thought experiment of French sensationism to offer a possible explanation for Ducreux's pictorial idea.

First, Condillac, in his *Traité des sensations* (1754), formulated the idea of identifying with a statue that gradually activated individual senses. This notion can be used to explain the sensationist idea of knowledge through sensual experience. A little later, Charles Bonnet also returned to Condillac's thought experiment in his *Essai analytique sur les facultés de l'âme* (1760), emphasising in particular "the importance of succession in the cognitive process."<sup>72</sup> In both publications, the lifeless statue begins to develop a sense of smell, which soon enables it to distinguish individual odours from one another. Gradually, the statue acquires hearing, taste, sight, and finally touch. In art-historical thinking, this sequence shows a certain parallelism to a common argument of the *Paragone*: only the sense of touch completes the sense of sight.<sup>73</sup>

Ducreux's painting, however, seems to be less about commonplace art theory than about the problem of the mute and immobilised image. It is only when we put ourselves in a role comparable to Condillac's statue – first supplementing the sense of sight with hearing (we now hear a yawn) and finally also allowing the frozen pose in Ducreux's painting to move (we now see the completion of the stretching) – that the ambiguity of the image is resolved. In an ironic refraction, Ducreux's work thus possibly refers both to contemporary sensationist questions of knowledge and to classic problems in art theory about the

<sup>71</sup> O'Neal, 1996 (note 6), p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>73</sup> In this regard, reference should be made to William Molyneux's question to John Locke (letter July 7, 1688), which was also taken up by Condillac (and Diderot): Can a person who had been blind since birth and subsequently acquired sight now distinguish bodies through sight alone, which he had previously only grasped through the sense of touch? Cf. Julian Jachmann, "Sensualistische Tendenzen in der französischen Architekturtheorie des späten 18. Jahrhunderts", in *Phantasia*, 5, 2017, pp. 84–95, here p. 85.

materiality and illusion of visual media as well as about the comparability of painting and poetry, which was also dealt with in contemporary discourses (Dubos, Lessing).<sup>74</sup>

Even if we understand the painting as a kind of role portrait, a yawning Democritus likewise reflects on ancient philosophical ideas regarding sensory perception. In Democritus's model, sensations are an important starting point for understanding. Simultaneously, they allow thinking to remain in the 'obscure'. Only 'genuine' thinking, via analytical and cognitive processes, leads to an understanding of what the senses only imprecisely guess.<sup>75</sup>

Accordingly, Ducreux's *Bâilleur* represents a work that deals with highly topical issues of its time in many respects: it subverts hierarchies of high and low on the eve of the French Revolution, and it displays the productivity of boredom, which, at this particular time, had the potential to either destroy or renew.

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<sup>74</sup> See Dubos, 1719 (note 17); Lessing, 1766 (note 70).

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Javier Berzal de Dios, "Velázquez's *Democritus*. Global Disillusion and the Critical Hermeneutics of a Smile", in *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 39/1, 2016, pp. 35–62, here p. 43.