

The Minds and Bodies of Women in the Salon Views of Gabriel de Saint-Aubin : a "peintre de la vie moderne" in the Age of Enlightenment

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It has quite often been noted that Gabriel de Saint-Aubin (1724–1780) failed, on several occasions in the early 1750s, to win the Grand prix de peinture at the French Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture. Nevertheless, as duly recorded in the academy's *procès-verbal* of August 31, 1753, he was awarded a second Grand prix for his painting representing "Nabucodonosor qui ordonne le massacre des enfants de Sédécias, Roi de Jérusalem, et lui fait ensuite crever les yeux".¹ Six days earlier, on August 25, the Salon of the Académie royale had opened, inspiring the artist's earliest masterpiece, an original etching that he inscribed with the title *Vue du Salon du Louvre en l'année 1753*.² In this work of modest size but inherent grandeur, it is not Old Testament heroes who are celebrated, but rather contemporary Parisians – and particularly Parisiennes – who climb the stairs to share the sensory, intellectual, and spiritual experience of a great art exhibition (fig. 1).

I would like to offer special thanks to the organisers of the conference of June 10–12, 2021 at the Louvre-Lens for having overcome so many obstacles to make it possible. In 2012, Isabelle Pichet had generously invited me to give a keynote lecture at a conference on "Le Salon de l'Académie royale de peinture et sculpture: Archéologie d'une institution", where I also had the pleasure of working with Gaëtane Maës et Dorit Kluge. The book resulting from the 2012 conference gave me an opportunity to revisit my prior reflections on Saint-Aubin's celebrated Salon views: Kim de Beaumont, "Les Salons de Gabriel de Saint-Aubin" in Isabelle Pichet (ed.), *Le Salon de l'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture: Archéologie d'une institution*, Paris, 2014, p. 9–32.

- 1 Anatole de Montaiglon (ed.), *Procès-verbaux de l'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture*, 10 vol., Paris, 1875–1892, VI, p. 362. The painting now belongs to the Musée du Louvre; illus. in Gabriel de Saint-Aubin 1724–1780, Colin B. Bailey, Kim de Beaumont, Pierre Rosenberg, and Christophe Leribault (eds.), exh. cat., New York and Paris, The Frick Collection, New York and Musée du Louvre, Paris, 2007, fig. 4, p. 13. Most illustrations for the present essay are found in this catalogue and references will be given as follows: Exh. cat., New York and Paris, 2007, cat. [or fig].
- 2 Exh. cat., New York and Paris, 2007, cat. 69 (Perrin Stein).



- 1 Gabriel de Saint Aubin, *Vue du Salon du Louvre en l'année 1753* (detail), 1753, etching, 14.8 × 18.1 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of Drawings and Prints, Wrightsman Fund, 2006

Let us emphasise from the outset that Saint-Aubin was the sole inventor of views of the Salons of the Académie royale in the 18th century as we know them today, primarily through the skillful imitations engraved in the 1780s by Pietro Antonio Martini (1737–1797). With the exception of a few anonymous printmakers who provided generalised almanach illustrations of the Salon of 1699, no artist before Gabriel de Saint-Aubin had the idea of representing, in a detailed and comprehensive way, the exhibitions of works by the members of the Royal Academy, which were held regularly from 1737 and biennially from 1751.³ Considering that he never became a “peintre du Roi”, despite his participation in four successive competitions for the Grand prix de peinture from 1752 to 1754, and that he therefore could never exhibit his own works at the Salon, there is a certain irony that renders even more remarkable his contribution to the iconography of these official exhibitions.⁴ By remaining outside the academic system, and by practicing in more varied and less hierarchical professional circles, Saint-Aubin had, perhaps, the advantage of a clearer view of the emerging public space – open and mutable – which was taking root through the royally-sponsored but freely accessible Salons. Specifically, as an instructor at Jacques-François Blondel’s (1705–1774) École des Arts from at least 1747, and through collaboration with other organisers of public courses targeting an audience of Parisian men and women eager

3 Isabelle Pichet, *Le Tapissier et les dispositifs discursifs au Salon (1750–1789)*, Paris, 2012, p. 16.

4 The total of four competitions includes a special competition in 1753, for a vacated place in the École royale des élèves protégés: Montaiglon, 1875–1892, VI, p. 365.

to become initiated in various branches of learning, Gabriel de Saint-Aubin personally participated in the advances toward universal education which were being made in the second half of the 18th century.

It should also be noted that in inventing his Salon views, Saint-Aubin did not repeat himself. He created at least three distinct types: the 1753 view, which is essentially a genre scene depicting spectators ascending the staircase; the 1757 view, which is an allegorical celebration of the Marquise de Pompadour as she is personified in her portrait by François Boucher (1703–1770)⁵; and the views of 1765 and 1767 (as well as that of 1779), which are spectacular panoramas in miniature where virtually all of the works exhibited are clearly recognisable.⁶ This latter type of global view, which Martini would imitate about twenty years later, corresponds to the Salon livrets and sale catalogues which Saint-Aubin illustrated by hand and which provide an invaluable resource for modern art historians. The documentary value of these works, however great, is perhaps the least of their qualities, because Saint-Aubin was above all an artist who was not content simply to inform or entertain his viewers. With all of the Parisian subjects that he treated throughout his career, from the most momentous historical occasions to the most ephemeral occurrences, he always aspired to have us experience the present moment, long before the French artists of the later 19th century who are most often credited as the earliest "peintres de la vie moderne" (fig. 2).

Attention and inattention; motion and rest

The announcement of the "Expérience sensorielle dans les expositions d'art au XVI^e–II^e siècle" project in 2019, as I was completing an article on women artists in the family and oeuvre of Gabriel de Saint-Aubin, inspired me to revisit once more – but from a different angle – these Salon views that one may justifiably number among his greatest achievements.⁷ Saint-Aubin was an artist for whom family ties, both professional and personal, played an exceptionally important role. The many drawings in which he portrays young women absorbed in pursuits like drawing, playing musical instruments, sewing, or simply reading and reflecting – drawings that seem most often to have been taken from life – have left us with a cumulative image of the inner life of women rivaled by few 18th-century French artists other than great predecessors like Antoine Watteau (1684–1721) and Jean-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779). As I reflected on the theme of this project, it occurred to me that there is a strong family resemblance between the anonymous young women immortalised in Saint-Aubin's sketches and those who bring such poetry and

5 Exh. cat., New York and Paris, 2007, fig. 14, p. 31.

6 Exh. cat., New York and Paris, 2007, cat. 70; fig. 1, p. 272; cat. 72.

7 Kim de Beaumont, "Les Femmes artistes dans la famille et dans l'oeuvre de Gabriel de Saint-Aubin", in Élise Pavy, Stéphane Pujol and Patrick Waldowski (eds.), *Femmes artistes à l'âge classique*, Paris, 2021, p. 61–73.

humanity to his view of the Salon of 1753. These are young women who have inspired the artist and who are themselves capable of being inspired. Their physical presence at the Salon and their susceptibility to all of its sensory stimuli is matched by their capacity for



- 2 Edgar Degas, *Mary Cassatt at the Louvre: The Etruscan Gallery*, 1879–1880, soft-ground etching, drypoint, aquatint, and etching, 26.8 × 23.2 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of Drawings and Prints, Rogers Fund, 1919

understanding. In revisiting Saint-Aubin's Salon views, I particularly wanted to revisit the image of a woman in the 1753 view (fig. 1) who is shown standing near one of the large windows on the right, looking out. Her face is bathed in sunlight and she is accompanied by a small child. She is arguably the most evocative of the thousands of appealing characters that this artist imagined. For the moment, at least, she does not look at the works of art surrounding her. She pauses, she reflects; judging from her radiant expression, she seems to be daydreaming. Yet despite her momentary inattention, she expresses more eloquently than any other figure in the scene the excitement of the general public climbing the stairs to see the show. In analysing the composition of the etching, we can see how this young woman is found at the final resting point of the deep upward spiral that the artist has created to convey the circulation of people – especially elegantly dressed women – which begins in the lower right and culminates in the upper right. If we divide the composition into vertical bands, we can see even more clearly how much our perception of the spectators' arrival is influenced by the presence of women, well individualised, all wearing the graceful, voluminous dresses of the period. One is particularly struck by the charming demeanour of a girl of about twelve profiled at foreground center, who seems attentive to maintaining an attitude of adult dignity in keeping with the honour of the occasion. Her ramrod posture and pensive air recall the *Fille au volant* by Chardin, an artist who was equally sensitive to tender moments of pre-adolescence.⁸ Elsewhere, a pair of young girls in the upper right, one leaning over the balustrade to look down on those approaching from below, and the other glancing sideways toward someone or something we cannot see, communicate an entirely natural sense of lived experience, as is often seen in the sketches of the "Livre de croquis" of Gabriel de Saint-Aubin now belonging to the Musée du Louvre.⁹ Saint-Aubin was a male artist who paid genuine attention to the individuality of women's faces and personalities.

In Saint-Aubin's Salon views, just as in his intimate, spontaneous sketches, women play an active and varied role, suggesting not only their physical presence but also their imaginative participation. Thus, the woman looking toward the outside world subliminally reminds us that the quest for beauty is not confined within the walls of the Salon Carré. And it bears repeating how exceptional this representation is among characterisations of women in 18th-century French art. The ingenious idea of portraying so vividly a woman who pays no attention, at least momentarily, to the exhibited art works, and of endowing that woman with such a culminating role in the composition, is entirely characteristic of Saint-Aubin's subtle thinking in portraying scenes of Parisian life – a type of representation that most of his contemporaries treated more prosaically. To find a closer comparison, one would have to wait for the characterisation of certain women in the views of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre envisaged by Hubert Robert (1733–1808) during the time of

8 This composition was engraved by François-Bernard Lépicié (1698–1755) in 1742.

9 See, for example, the individualised expressions of three young girls in a study found on fol. 5 verso, p. 10; illus. in Xavier Salmon, *Le "Livre de croquis" de Gabriel de St. Aubin*, Milan and Paris, 2017, p. 21.

the French Revolution.¹⁰ Still more directly, the distinctive presences of individual women in the *Vue du Salon en l'année 1753* anticipate Edgar Degas's (1834-1917) print depicting Mary Cassatt and her sister on a visit to the Galerie des Étrusques at the Louvre (1879-1880), where the momentary poses of the two young women, expressing their different personalities and responses to the museum environment, constitute the true subject of the artwork (fig. 2).

The probable inspiration for Saint-Aubin's etching is an engraved illustration, sometimes attributed to Charles-Nicolas Cochin (1715-1790), which was used as a frontispiece for a pamphlet by Jacques Lacombe critiquing this same 1753 Salon.¹¹ As described in previous publications, the illustration alludes to a humorous anecdote in the text, where the author, who wishes simply to climb the stairs giving access to the Salon in order to see the show, is waylaid by a "lorgneur" who insists on denouncing verbosely the current state of the arts in France.¹² Saint-Aubin avoids such comical episodes in favor of a more natural sense of people's comings and goings within the public space. Even the dog who has paused on the landing to look directly upward makes us smile rather than laugh. Saint-Aubin's preference for observing contemporary life for its own sake, without imposing a particular narrative or interpretation, is another modern tendency in his art.

And what seems particularly curious – as mentioned at the outset – is that in this same year of 1753 the artist was making his most concerted attempts to master the grand manner of history painting practiced by the members of the Académie royale, where the narration of melodramatic biblical episodes and emphatic declamatory gestures were *de rigueur*. It is perhaps more surprising that the large canvas depicting Nebuchadnezzar and Zedekiah won the second place medal in the 1753 grand prix competition than that Saint-Aubin ultimately failed to win the Grand prix de peinture, for it seems self-evident that this was neither the genre of painting nor the type of subject best suited to showcase his unique talents.¹³ As with many celebrated artists of the 19th century, Gabriel de Saint-Aubin's eventual failure in official competitions seems to have encouraged him to develop aspects of his art which we most appreciate today for their 'modernité'.

The lack of reliable demographic data on Salon audiences during this period prevents us from commenting from a historical perspective on the precedence that Saint-Aubin accords to female spectators in his 1753 Salon view.¹⁴ His way of prioritising the presence of women – and their attire – has much in common with the art of François Boucher, whom Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin (1721-1786) mentions among his brother's *conseillers* at

10 Kim de Beaumont, *Reconsidering Gabriel de Saint-Aubin (1724-1780): The Background for his Scenes of Paris*, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1998; University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, 2002, p. 437-438.

11 Exh. cat., New York and Paris, 2007, fig. 1, p. 266.

12 De Beaumont, 1998, p. 408-411.

13 His two paintings for the special competition of 1753, representing *Laban cherchant ses idoles*, are more successful, particularly the sketch now in Cleveland: Exh. cat., New York and Paris, 2007, fig. 2, p. 12 and fig. 8, p. 26.

14 Pichet, 2012, p. 17 (citing the research of Udolfo van de Sandt and Thomas Crow on Salon attendance during this period).

the Académie royale. It was at the Salon of 1753 that Boucher exhibited his splendid canvases commissioned by Madame de Pompadour, the *Lever du Soleil* and the *Coucher du Soleil*, which can be discerned at the left of Saint-Aubin's etching.¹⁵ A still more profound influence for him was that of Antoine Watteau, who had set the pattern for great art that aspires not to take itself too seriously.¹⁶ Watteau, too, failed to win the Grand prix, but was awarded a second prize.

It is not possible, at least as of yet, to establish a direct correlation between Saint-Aubin's Salon views and the results of recent scholarship on the growing participation of 18th-century women in the arts – as artists, spectators, patrons, collectors, even critics.¹⁷ Most of these studies are based on lines of inquiry requiring meticulous examination and reconstruction of fragmentary evidence whose coherent interpretation is not always easily achieved, but which gives a cumulative sense of emerging changes in European thought from around 1750 onward concerning the agency of women in domains previously considered exclusively male.¹⁸ It is still more doubtful that Saint-Aubin sought through his Salon views to mount a polemical response to theoretical texts denouncing women's influence on the arts and the purported risks to morals posed by their presence in the public space.¹⁹ Without in any way suggesting that Saint-Aubin sought consciously to illustrate or promote a more participatory role for female Salon-goers, he seems intuitively to have been recognised, as early as 1753, developments which would manifest themselves more and more forcefully in the coming decades. If condescending and sometimes condemning attitudes still continued to prevail, they had begun to co-exist with more innovative ideas concerning women and their education.

Bodies on display

It was in the context of his activity as an adjunct instructor in figure drawing in Jacques-François Blondel's École des Arts – an activity that Saint-Aubin had begun around 1747 and pursued without interruption throughout his participation in competitions for the Grand prix de peinture – that he had the idea of representing the Salon of 1757 for no less

15 Pichet, 2012, p. 75.

16 Aaron Wile, "Watteau, Reverie, and Selfhood", in *The Art Bulletin*, 96/3, 2014, p. 319–337; and *Watteau's soldiers: scenes of military life in eighteenth-century France*, exh. cat., New York, The Frick Collection, 2016.

17 See, for example, Melissa Hyde et al., *Plumes et pinceaux: Discours de femmes sur l'art en Europe (1750–1850)*, Dijon, 2012; see also Paris Amanda Spies-Gans, "Exceptional, but not Exceptions: Public Exhibitions and the Rise of the Woman Artist in London and Paris, 1760–1830", in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 51/4, 2018, p. 393–416. These studies focus mainly on the period of the French Revolution and the early 19th century. But see the recent work of Anna Rigg: "La fille de Dibutade au Salon de 1783", in Élise Pavy, Stéphane Pujol and Patrick Waldowski (eds.), *Femmes artistes à l'âge classique*, Paris, 2021, p. 281–295.

18 Painstaking reconstruction of fragmentary and episodic accounts is also necessary in studying male artists such as Gabriel de Saint-Aubin, who were not highly successful during their lifetimes.

19 Bernadette Fort, "Peinture et féminité chez Jean-Jacques Rousseau", in *Revue de l'histoire littéraire en France*, 104^e Année, no. 2, 2004, p. 363–394. But see n. 21 below.

a personage than Madame de Pompadour. At this Salon both the life-size portrait of the marquise which she had commissioned from Boucher and the marble version of *l'Amour menaçant* which she had commissioned from Maurice-Étienne Falconet (1716–1791) were exhibited. The circumstances of the illustration project in which Saint-Aubin conceived his view of the 1757 Salon, discussed in some of my prior publications, do not concern us here.²⁰ But this illustration drawn by hand and inserted in a specially dedicated copy of a printed book – Du Perron's *Discours sur la peinture et sur l'architecture, dédié à Madame de Pompadour, dame du palais de la reine* (1758), luxuriously bound by Dubuisson with the marquise's coat of arms – allows us to consider from a different but no less intriguing angle the theme of women's minds and bodies in Saint-Aubin's Salon views. Here, the prioritisation of a feminine personage is a normal consequence of the commission. The portrait installed in the approximate center of the image acts as a symbolic personification of the Marquise de Pompadour, in the same way as the portrait medallion of her brother, the Marquis de Marigny, in the accompanying, more obviously allegorical illustration.²¹ In the homage to Marigny, Saint-Aubin cleverly inserts Falconet's *Amour menaçant*, his back turned as if to disguise himself, thereby linking the two images and transforming them both into celebrations of Pompadour's patronage. It cannot be sufficiently emphasised that Saint-Aubin did not aspire to perfect accuracy in depicting the works of art he chose for allegorical purposes. In Saint-Aubin's sketch, Pompadour sits up straighter than in Boucher's painting (to the extent that the Goncourt brothers mistook this for the pastel portrait by Maurice-Quentin de La Tour [1704–1788]). One might almost say that she carries herself more like a queen than a *maîtresse en titre*. Falconet's *Amour menaçant*, as sketched by Saint-Aubin, is more of an adorable baby than a precocious child, with a mischievous, knowing look. The key purpose of these images is to charm and to flatter, with no need for the artist to constrain himself to faithful documentation of the exhibited art works. Thus, while it is unlikely that Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne's (1704–1778) bust of Louis XV, also shown at the Salon of 1757, was installed right next to the portrait of his mistress, Saint-Aubin made the very reasonable choice, from a thematic perspective, to show them side-by-side. There is even a sense that the king is casting an admiring glance her way. In such an essentially fictive environment, a swarm of cherubs floating in through the upper windows and bearing rose garlands seems to have every right to exist.

On the other hand, the mortal beings circulating in the exhibition space offer no more than a skillfully crafted illusion of reality, quite remote from the crowded conditions

20 Most recently in Kim de Beaumont, "Le Marquis de Marigny, 'L'Ombre du grand Colbert' and the Genius of Gabriel de Saint-Aubin", in *Diderot Studies*, 36, 2016, p. 231–246.

21 Considering that Saint-Aubin had recently taken inspiration from the *Ombre du grand Colbert* in creating a presentation drawing intended for the Marquis de Marigny, it is notable that La Font de Saint-Yenne had criticised, in a fairly virulent tone, the prevalent interest in female portraits in his *Réflexions sur quelques causes de l'état présent de la peinture en France* (1747), a critique of the 1746 Salon, and again in his *Sentiments sur quelques ouvrages de peinture, sculpture et gravure, écrits à un particulier en province* (1754): Fort, 2004, p. 379–380.

which must have existed in the Salon Carré. We find an approximation of this same cast of players – including elegantly dressed women, gallant gentlemen, and children – in the artist's finest genre scenes of around 1760, where Watteau's influence is most strongly felt.²² If the Parisian women circulating in the exhibition space yield the starring role to Pompadour's portrait, they are nevertheless characterised in a manner that is richly varied considering their limited number. A group standing just in front of the focal painting consists of two women, one of whom looks at the picture while the other gazes out toward the viewer, as well as a little girl who may be the daughter or younger sister of one of the women. As in the 1753 Salon view, the presence of children suggests the educative potential of the exhibition, and recalls Gabriel de Saint-Aubin's contribution to the artistic education of his own brothers and sisters.²³ A tall, majestic woman, seen in profile, approaches from the right, on the arm of a man who is noticeably shorter than she.²⁴ In Saint-Aubin's drawing, the physical presence of this 'real' woman is as much (or even more) an expression of the artist's fantasy as the 'painted' presence of Madame de Pompadour. Here again, Saint-Aubin seems intuitively to touch upon the questions of representation and illusion which would preoccupy artists of the following century.

All the charm and refinement of Gabriel de Saint-Aubin's view of the 1757 Salon is overturned in a satirical drawing that his older brother Charles-Germain consigned to the *Livre de caricatures tant bonnes que mauvaises*, now part of the Rothschild Collection at Waddesdon Manor.²⁵ Gabriel, too, was capable of introducing a satirical note into his depictions of Parisian life, including another drawing of the Salon of 1757 in which he alludes to gossip that had arisen regarding a sculpture exhibited there by Pierre-Philippe Mignot (1715–1770) as a proposed pendant to the antique Hermaphrodite.²⁶ Mignot's *Vénus qui dort*, as imagined by Saint-Aubin, is as fanciful, in its way, as his allegorised interpretation of Boucher's portrait of Madame de Pompadour at the same Salon. Through the medium of pen and ink, Saint-Aubin was able to restore Mignot's plaster sculpture – which had been accused of being nothing more than the plaster cast of the real body of a Parisian girl – to full-bodied, provocative life.²⁷ Moreover, it would appear that she is savoring her exhibitionist role vis-à-vis the Salon-goers surrounding her, among them a turbaned

22 See, for example, Exh. cat, New York and Paris, 2007, cat. 44 and 45 (Colin B. Bailey). Regarding the influence of Watteau's *Enseigne de Gersaint* on Saint-Aubin's 1757 Salon view, see de Beaumont, 2014, p. 24.

23 See de Beaumont, 2021, p. 64–68.

24 Might it be possible to discern a certain resemblance between this stately lady and the queen Marie Leszczyńska?

25 See Kim de Beaumont, "The Saint-Aubins sketching for fun and profit", in Colin Jones, Juliet Carey and Emily Richardson (eds.), *The Saint-Aubin "Livre de caricatures": Drawing satire in eighteenth-century Paris*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2012, p. 72–74.

26 Exh. cat, New York and Paris, 2007, fig. 1, p. 70. The drawing came up for auction on 31 March 2016 (Artcurial, Paris, "Quelques chefs-d'œuvre provenant de la collection Georges Dormeuil", in *Tableaux et dessins anciens et du XIX^e siècle*, cat. 2).

27 De Beaumont, 2014, p. 24–25.

man at the foot of the couch who seems particularly fascinated. The idea of the sense of touch, which is inherent in the ancient sculpture serving as Mignot's inspiration, becomes, in Saint-Aubin's sketch, a sly commentary on the sensual temptations of the Salon. In this suggestive scene, the artist chose to represent a young boy, rather than a young girl, accompanying his mother in the left foreground; still, the mother seems to be directing her son's attention to Falconet's more modest *Nymph*, here placed next to Lemoyne's bust of the king. About a century before the scandalous appearance of Édouard Manet's (1832–1883) *Olympia* at the Salon of 1865, Saint-Aubin was capable of mocking, with his characteristic airy tone, male viewers' hypocritical reliance on antique precedents to justify their pleasure in tantalising displays of female flesh. One can discern a comparable trace of irony in an etching from around the same date, which the artist entitled *l'Académie particulière*.²⁸ In the painting of the same subject now in The Frick Collection, a crescent moon is painted on the headboard, suggesting an association with the goddess Diana.²⁹

Maternal guidance

A commission for an illustration in 1762 inspired Saint-Aubin to invent a female body still more remarkable than that of Mignot's *Vénus*. I refer to a frontispiece he etched for Belanger's *Almanach historico-physique ou la Phisiosophie des Dames* (fig. 3), a booklet containing a description of public courses in the sciences, as well as a list of addresses of natural history collections that one could visit in Paris at that time (including Belanger's on the rue Saint-Antoine).³⁰ The author prefaces the text with an "Épître dédicatoire aux dames physophiles" in which allusion is made to "le goût que plusieurs d'entre vous, Mesdames, font paroître pour cette agréable étude, ou si vous voulez, ce noble amusement".³¹ An announcement of this brochure in the *Mercure de France* of January 1763 refers to "cette Science, qui est à présent si cultivée par les Sçavans, & dont la plupart des femmes font avec plaisir le sujet de leurs occupations".³² Such an admixture of condescension toward Parisian women eager to acquire in-depth knowledge of the natural sciences and recognition of their growing contributions to this field of study recalls the slow-but-steady progress that woman were also making in the visual arts in the

28 Exh. cat, New York and Paris, 2007, cat. 67 (Perrin Stein).

29 Exh. cat, New York and Paris, 2007, cat. 66 (Colin B. Bailey).

30 See de Beaumont, 1998, p. 463. The identity of the author is not otherwise known to us, although it is tempting to imagine some association with the architect François-Joseph Belanger (1744–1818), who would have been only nineteen years old at this time. Belanger's subsequent interactions with the Comte de Lauraguais and Sophie Arnould suggest a mutual circle of acquaintance with the Saint-Aubin family.

31 Belanger, *Almanach historico-physique, ou la phisiosophie des dames*, Paris, 1763, p. 3–4.

32 *Mercure de France*, January 1763, p. 76.

- 3 Gabriel de Saint-Aubin, *Frontispiece for "l'Almanach historico-physique" by Belanger*, Paris, 1762, etching, 10 × 5.6 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, purchased with the support of the F.G. Waller-Fonds, 1959

second half of the 18th century.³³ As far as Saint-Aubin's own attitudes are concerned, it may be significant that he pasted a miniature study for this composition onto a page of his "Livre de croquis" where we also see a young woman who is seated and poring over a book that she is holding closely.³⁴

In the foreground of the curiosity cabinet that Saint-Aubin envisioned for Belanger's readers, several genii-visitors to the cabinet – which is filled to overflowing with specimens of all kinds – pause to admire the sculpted figure of a veiled woman with four breasts, symbolising, according to a notice in the *Avant-Coureur* of January 17, 1763, "la Nature représentée sous les attributs de la *Magna Mater* des anciens", with the further explanation that "[e]lle a une partie du sein découverte, comme pour indiquer que ce que nous connoissons le mieux de ses opérations, ce sont les choses relatives aux besoins de la première nécessité".³⁵ Beginning with more conventional elements



33 See Margaret Carlyle, "Collecting the World in Her Boudoir: Women and Scientific Amateurism in Eighteenth-Century Paris", in *Early Modern Women*, 11/1, 2016, p. 149–161.

34 Fol. 9 recto, p. 15: X. Salmon, 2017, p. 24. On the association of ideas in Saint-Aubin's composite drawings, see, for example, Exh. cat, New York and Paris, 2007, cat. 77 (Kim de Beaumont).

35 *Avant-Coureur*, 17 January 1763, p. 48.

for this type of vignette, such as the crocodile suspended from the ceiling, similar to one his brother Augustin had drawn in 1757 for a sale catalogue frontispiece, Gabriel de Saint-Aubin stuffed the shelves surrounding the walls with the most varied examples of taxidermy, among which can be discerned a peacock, an ostrich, what may be a zebra, and an elephant, all appearing startlingly alive.³⁶ On a table in the center of the room, he scattered assorted shells, tusks, and fossilised bones. Under the table is a skeleton resembling that of a whale Saint-Aubin had seen on the boulevard Saint-Martin and sketched in his copy of his friend Sedaine's *Recueil de poésies*.³⁷ As strange and negligible as such a commission might seem to a member of the Académie royale, for an instructor at Blondel's École des Arts and a collaborator of other organisers of public courses addressed most often to women as well as to men, this illustration assignment exemplifies the fundamentally original and innovative orientation of Saint-Aubin's career. And this career, in all of its infinitesimal details, has much to teach us about alternative exhibitions of arts and sciences, fruits of the age of Enlightenment and important precedents for the independent and universal exhibitions of the 19th century.

On February 15 of this same year, 1762, Étienne-André Philippe de Prétôt had published in the *Annonces, affiches et avis divers* the initial announcement of his *Spectacle de l'histoire romaine*, an ambitious illustration project that would preoccupy Gabriel de Saint-Aubin for most of the 1760s.³⁸ The announcement published on February 22 mentions that several of the completed illustrations were on view at the establishment of the bookseller Quillau on the rue Christine, an address chosen "comme la plus convenable aux Curieux, par sa proximité aux spectacles".³⁹ The idea for Saint-Aubin's Salon views of 1765 and 1767, panoramic and minutely detailed, occurred to the artist during the period of his most intense collaboration with Philippe, a royal censor and an organiser of public courses tied to the publication of his *Spectacle de l'histoire romaine*.⁴⁰ In advertising his

36 See Daniela Bleichmar, "Learning to Look: Visual Expertise across Art and Science in Eighteenth-Century France", in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 46/1, 2012, 46, p. 85–111. This study establishes a convincing correlation between the principles pertaining to the formation of picture cabinets and natural history cabinets in Paris from 1740 onwards. The correlation is seen, for example, in two auction catalogue frontispieces, one showing a picture gallery and the other a natural history cabinet, which Augustin de Saint-Aubin (1736–1807) designed for Pierre Rémy in 1757, thus contemporaneously with his brother Gabriel's 1757 Salon view: de Beaumont, 1998, p. 415–417.

37 Émile Dacier, *Gabriel de Saint-Aubin, Peintre, dessinateur et graveur (1724–1780): Catalogue raisonné*, vol. II Paris and Brussels, 1931, cat. 1071 (t. 1, p. 160 of the printed book).

38 *Annonces, affiches et avis divers*, 15 February 1762, p. 101–102.

39 *Ibid.*, 22 February 1762, p. 110. Similar reasoning applied to the planning of the impressionist exhibitions.

40 De Beaumont, 2014, p. 15–17. It is likely that Saint-Aubin planned to engrave, or to have engraved, his drawings representing the Salons of 1765 and 1767, whose dimensions, technique, and panoramic perspective are all quite similar to those of his drawings representing the *Bataille navale d'Enome* and the *Triomphe de Pompée à Rome*, subsequently engraved for Philippe's project. In this regard, one might add that P. A. Martini would contribute to the *Spectacle de l'histoire romaine* at the time of its belated publication in the 1770s: *Mercure de France*, May 1778, p. 162–164.

public courses, Philippe often solicited the participation of women. An announcement he published in the *Avant-Coureur* of 4 November 1765 refers to the educative role of mothers with respect to their daughters:

Le goût des études Historiques & tout ce qui y tient est aujourd'hui presque général dans les familles sensées. Une mère croiroit qu'il manque un article essentiel à l'éducation de ses filles, si elles ignoroient leur langue, la Géographie & l'Histoire. C'est sans doute ce même motif qui a déterminé bien des personnes du sexe à fréquenter, avec une assiduité & une constance admirable, les leçons publiques de M. Philippe, chez qui elles ont trouvé une compagnie sortable, & tous les égards auxquels elles doivent partout s'attendre.⁴¹

If these words bring to mind the pairing of women and children in Saint-Aubin's Salon views, and more generally, the characterisations of studious young women in his drawings, the professional context of public courses provides a more convincing means of establishing a link between the two. The unfinished drawing depicting the Salon of 1765 and its resplendent successor of 1767 present us with a microcosmic vision of the Salon where the artist leaves it to the viewer's curiosity and diligence to discern the multiple details seamlessly integrated in each composition.⁴² The art works, the individual roles played by the spectators, and the allegorical personifications in the case of the 1767 view, are all enlisted into the collective service of a quasi-magical celebration of a great historical occasion, patriotic and ephemeral in nature, which is also a triumph of the human spirit. These drawings are precursors to the late masterpieces in which Saint-Aubin was able to communicate – in an unprecedented way – the communal ecstasy of the Parisian crowd in moments such as the *Couronnement de Voltaire au Théâtre Français* in 1778, or their shared fascination with the scientific demonstrations of the chemist Balthazar-Georges Sage at the Hôtel de la Monnaie in 1779.⁴³

Wandering through the 1767 view with a magnifying glass in hand, it appears that the number of male and female Salon-goers is roughly equal. While the men seem to be circulating mainly among the tables in the foreground on which sculptures are displayed (and paying special attention to those representing feminine figures), the women, often accompanied by children, circulate more generally throughout the exhibition space. In the foreground on the left, a young girl in a pink dress opens her arms in a gesture of enthusiastic admiration for the allegorical sculpture of *Innocence* by Jean-Jacques Caffieri (1725–1792),

41 *Avant-coureur*, 4 November 1765, p. 689–690. From 1753, at least, Philippe had been advertising private lessons in history and geography intended for “jeunes personnes des deux sexes”: see *Annonces, affiches et avis divers*, 14 June 1753, p. 365.

42 Exh. cat., New York and Paris, 2007, cat. 70; fig. 1, p. 272.

43 Exh. cat., New York and Paris, 2007, cat. 63; cat 25.

which is immediately in front of her.⁴⁴ A woman wearing blue, who is probably the girl's mother, watches her from nearby. In counterpoint to this group, all the way at the back of the room on the right are several women and children whose Lilliputian proportions do not prevent us from perceiving their animated movements and gestures. And in the foreground on the far right is another woman whose form partly conceals that of a girl standing just beside her. The woman is pointing out to her young companion not the grand picture by Hubert Robert which hangs above, but rather one of the paintings in a row of very small pictures just below, whose compositions are less clearly distinguishable.⁴⁵ One could almost imagine that Saint-Aubin consciously revived here his idea for the 1753 view, whereby the composition comes to rest with the figure of a woman turning away from the grandeur of the event for a moment of quiet reflection in the company of her child.

Daniela Bleichmar has talked about the "salle de classe publique" represented by Augustin de Saint-Aubin in his frontispiece for an auction catalogue showing a natural history cabinet.⁴⁶ With reference to Watteau's *Enseigne de Gersaint* – one of the fundamental inspirations for Saint-Aubin's Salon views – Bleichmar remarks:

The painting provides a lesson on showing, looking, and not looking: not only the attentive, expert looking of the two groups, but also the lack of looking at the paintings behind...The dealer's shop was not only a space for selling art; it was also a classroom for the development of visual expertise.⁴⁷

In both cases, Bleichmar is describing what was above all a closed environment for privileged individuals, able to exercise their expertise in the selection and acquisition of objects for their private collections. Particularly with regard to the representation of women spectators at the Salons of the Académie royale, Gabriel de Saint-Aubin recognised the opportunity that this evolving space for public discourse, open at no charge to the general Parisian public, offered to serve as a "salle de classe publique" for all, anticipating the great museums of the 19th century.

44 *Explication des peintures, sculptures et gravures de Messieurs de l'Académie royale*, Paris, 1767, no. 204. This is the very sculpture that Diderot criticized for sending mixed sensual messages: Jules Guiffrey, *Les Caffieri...*, Paris, 1877, p. 201.

45 *Explication des peintures, sculptures et gravures de Messieurs de l'Académie royale*, 1767, no. 103 ("Grand Paysage dans le goût des Campagnes d'Italie").

46 Bleichmar, 2012 (note 36), p. 106.

47 Bleichmar, 2012, p. 101.

Concluding thoughts

The corporeality of women in Gabriel de Saint-Aubin's Salon views is always imbued with a sense of mind and meaning. Their active engagement – whether as viewers or objects on view – points to emerging realities of 18th-century culture which were not yet reflected in the male-dominated structure of the Académie royale. As a male artist whose professional practice had, of necessity, been channeled into more modest, piecemeal endeavors, Saint-Aubin was in a better position than many to understand the aspirations of his female colleagues or of women seeking more generally to acquire knowledge and agency in the realm of the fine arts. The emerging modernity of the artist's vision was matched by the technical means used in his etchings and drawings to capture, through effects of light and atmosphere, the essence of fleeting moments. Subtle nuances of body language, facial expression, and varied interactions among paired figures (such as women and children) or perfect strangers suggest a full gamut of sensory, emotional, and intellectual responses to the Salon, in which women move beyond the role of passive players. This ability to convey the infinite variety of responses within a single living moment can be observed throughout his representations of contemporary Parisian life, which often seem to leap ahead into the 19th century despite the old-fashioned foundations and trappings of his art.⁴⁸

After Jacques-François Blondel's death in 1774, Saint-Aubin became a member and adjunct instructor of the Académie de Saint-Luc, where he was finally recognised, notably at the Salon of the Académie de Saint-Luc in 1774, as a *peintre d'histoire*.⁴⁹ This was the exhibition where 'Mademoiselle Vigée' made her debut. Following the suppression of the Académie de Saint-Luc in 1776, Saint-Aubin became one of the principal participants in the Salon du Colisée, a Parisian Vauxhall whose existence was brief but of enormous cultural significance.⁵⁰ Finally, his art was exhibited posthumously at the initial Salon de la Correspondance, organised by Pahin de la Blancherie in 1783.⁵¹ Even in his views of the official Salon, Saint-Aubin celebrated the entreprising and inclusive spirit which characterised the world of public courses and extra-official exhibitions which, to a certain extent, welcomed the participation of women. This unified vision of the arts and sciences, which had been promulgated by Jacques-François Blondel, Philippe de Prétot, and others, found in Gabriel de Saint-Aubin an ideal interpreter, whose body of work points on many levels to the future of modern art.

48 De Beaumont, 1998, p. 457.

49 De Beaumont, 1998, p. 489–493.

50 De Beaumont, 1998, p. 500–504.

51 De Beaumont, 1998, p. 517–518.