



"I'm dying up here!" : Disappointing History Painting

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"O ! mes belles espérances, comme vous avés été déçues!" Thus spoke Amaury-Duval, in the guise of *Polyscope* in the first of his long meditations on the Salon of 1795.¹ This cry of disappointment follows a long passage conjuring a dreamlike anticipatory walk to the Salon, full of optimistic expectation as the author imagines how a truly Republican history painting finally free from court sycophancy might grasp the opportunities offered by the great scenes of recent Revolutionary virtue and self-sacrifice in French history.² And yet, having arrived at the Salon, *Polyscope* spends the next three of his five letters in a state of almost permanent, more or less muted disappointment at the nature (and the number) of history paintings on view.

Before exploring more specifically some of the causes of Amaury-Duval's rhetorical dismay, I would first posit that disappointment is absolutely a key trait of the reception of history painting from the beginning of the Salon until the end of the institution as a force. To judge by the critical literature, for every moment of genuine joyful surprise and excitement at the sight of a history painting there are myriad let-downs, as well as expressions of perplexity, disappointment and even disgust.³ The ability to produce such strong negative affect is, I would argue, a vital and sometimes overlooked structural marker of the genre.

Further, I would argue, history painting might precisely be structurally and institutionally set up to fail. This claim might seem surprising in the context of the theoretical and financial investment in the genre throughout the long eighteenth century.⁴ However,

1 Amaury Duval (Charles-Alexandre-Amaury Pineux), *Première lettre de Polyscope. Sur les ouvrages de peinture, sculptures, etc. exposés dans le grand Salon du Museum*, 1795, fol. 544. Digital version at URL: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10523753r> (accessed 21.12.2023).

2 Ibid., fol. 534-544.

3 For a discussion of 'Surprise' at the Salon, see Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, New Haven and London, 1985.

4 Among synthetic accounts of the aesthetics and primacy of history painting in Ancien Regime France see Hector David Reyes, *After Poussin: French history painting (1665-1785)*, Unpub. thesis, Northwestern University, 2010; Thomas Kirchner, *Der epische Held: Historienmalerei und Kunstpolitik im Frankreich des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Munich, 2001; Crow, 1985 (note 3); Jean Locquin, *La Peinture d'histoire en France de 1747 à 1785*, Paris, 1912; *Triomphe et mort du Héros: La Peinture d'histoire en Europe de Rubens à Manet*, Ekkehard Mai (ed.), exh. cat., Milan and Lyon, Musée des beaux-arts

my ongoing examination of history painting as a practice and lived experience reveals numerous tensions and pitfalls, from the upholding of impossibly perfect precedents to the creation and diffusion of nebulous, confused and self-contradictory theory; the structural incentives for the high drop-out rate among aspiring history painters because of narrow bottlenecks of aspiration and success inside the academy;⁵ the tensions between kinship and courtliness, merit and favouritism; not to mention the physical and mental toll on painters caused by the unsystematic, even arbitrary support of vast and disproportionately scaled commission and competition endeavours.⁶

One crucible of history painting's propensity for failure was the Salon exhibition – the space in which the ambitions and desires of the genres, and the demands, timeframes and scale of history painting in particular, were stress-tested against the contingencies of the physical, human and affective environment and the proximity of events in a major urban centre. Thus, in a volume focusing on the emotional and sensorial life of the Salon exhibitions, I want to argue that the packed and vibrant space of the *Salon Carré* became the crucible of disillusion: the sensory and spatial environment in which history painting's failure was not just seen but *felt*, provoking emotions that ranged from *Polyscope's* visceral disappointment to the bitter humour, bemusement and even revulsion that have characterised many reactions to history painting, reactions that contradict our understanding of the genre as the purest of intellectual experiences in painting, demanding a kind of detachment and elevation.

Given that the Salon was set up to serve the Academy and its priorities, it is all the more surprising that this space worked to provoke disappointment and to catalyse general failure. I would argue though that the Salon exhibitions produced more peril than fame, and subjected history painters and painting to especial pressure, given the opportunities for bad timing, mis-seeing, incomprehension and ignorance. These situations were created not only because of the gaps (in time and expectation) between the commission, conception, and display of history painting, but also due to the various kinds of intellectual and sensory 'obscurity' which constituted the conditions of the reception of such paintings in the physical space of the Salon – complex or novel subject matter, half-understood narratives explained in long and confusing *livrets*, and paintings hung either too high, too low or in inappropriate or unflattering light, etc. The question posed in Charles-Antoine Coyppel's eloquent dialogue riposte in 1751 to critiques of the 1747 Salon remains pertinent: What can the Salon do for painters and painting?

Lyon, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Kunsthau (Zürich), 1988; Paul Duro, *The Academy and the Limits of Painting in Seventeenth-Century France*, New York, 1997.

- 5 See Reed Benhamou, *Regulating the Académie: Art, Rules and Power in Ancien Régime France*, Oxford, 2009; Christian Michel, (tr. Chris Miller), *The Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture: the birth of the French school, 1648-1793*, Los Angeles, 2018.
- 6 Hannah Williams, "The Mysterious Suicide of François Lemoyne", in *Oxford Art Journal* 38/2, June 2015, pp. 225-245. Williams connects the suicidal impulse with perceived humiliations and stymieing of academic ambition in the painter.

S'ils ont affaire à des juges pour la plupart ignorans, prévénus ou injustes, quel profit peuvent-ils tirer de ces expositions?⁷

If incomprehension was a major intellectual reaction to history painting at the Salons, then disappointment is to me the affective description of the 'mood', at least as far as the Salons have been written about in the pamphlet literature. This disappointment takes many forms, from the serious-minded and politically-oriented critique of the loss, decadence or inappropriateness of current history painting so central to La Font de Saint-Yenne's critiques of the mid-century to the less earnestly and more humorously formulated but similar sentiments of those pamphleteers analysed by Crow, Fort and Wrigley.⁸ *La Vérité* of 1781 is just one of many examples of commentators pointing to the fact that, constantly, history painting was not what was expected or needed:

Un papillotage désagréable, un amas de couleurs brillantes, beaucoup d'incorrections, de la bizarrerie dans la composition, beaucoup de grimaces pour des graces simples & naïves, &c. & dix pages d'& cetera, forment un Tableau François bien conditionné.⁹

And this, ultimately, was the advice for history painters: "Faites tout le contraire de ce que vous faites, & vous ferez bien."¹⁰ This is familiar to all who have studied in any detail the typologies and rhetoric of Salon criticism. However, brilliant and perceptive scholarship has tended to attribute this to the specifics of particular critics' discontent with a social, political and cultural status quo, deflected or suppressed radical political anger, and thus to see it as part of the history of the pre-Revolutionary breakdown of academic and political authority.¹¹ While this account is certainly compelling, we should not neglect a more *longue-durée* view of history painting's impossible conditions – if we ignore the sycophantic official press, the critical record from the regularisation of the Salon shows that history painting is always in arrears vis-à-vis its ideals, always in decline or somehow already corrupted, always the opposite of what it supposed to be, seldom living up to its precedents, or crumbling under the burden of expectation. Again, I believe this is because history painting is a collective fantasy, one that is shared in different degrees and intensities between

7 Charles-Antoine Coypel, *Dialogue de M. Coypel, Premier Peintre Du Roi. Sur l'exposition Des Tableaux Dans Le Sallon Du Louvre, En 1747*, [Paris] 1751, p. 12.

8 For La Font, see La Font de Saint-Yenne, *Œuvre Critique*, Paris, 2001. On later criticism see Bernadette Fort, "Voice of the Public: The Carnivalization of Salon Art in Pre-Revolutionary Pamphlets", in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22/3, Spring 1989, pp. 368–394; Richard Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism: From the Ancien Régime to the Restoration*, Oxford and New York, 1993.

9 *La Vérité, Critique Des Tableaux Exposés Au Sallon Du Louvre En 1781*, 1781, Coll. Deloynes 260, p. 8. Digital version at URL: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84580280> (accessed 21.12.2023).

10 Ibid.

11 Crow, 1985 (note 3), esp. pp. 104–133, 211–254.

administrators, artists, and critics. Also, history painting is always a ‘site of potential’, but its actual manifestations in the lived, experiential situation of the Salon provoke a series of emotions and reactions that are mainly clustered around the negative; previous research that has focused on the ‘triumphs’ of individual paintings at the Salon has tended to occlude this overwhelmingly negative affect towards the majority of examples of the genre. I want to explore what leads to this disappointment by considering two Salons – one (1795) in which various forms of ‘potential’ were dragged into an untimely ‘reality’, and another (1773) where a collective image-making enterprise provoked embarrassment and disgust.

Untimely history painting at the Salon of 1795

I want first to focus on a couple of examples where the question might be of the ‘bad timing’ of history painting (or more to the point, the gap between its conception and its display in the public exhibition schedule) and particularly its ‘untimeliness’, where the various ‘times’ of history painting – the time from commission to making and display – rendered history painting vulnerable and exposed in ways that more flexible and rapid-response forms of cultural communication (from the quip to the caricature, the *chanson* to the comic-opera) were not. What happens when a history painting is untimely? What does that untimeliness feel like?

Of course, the *histoire* in *peinture d’histoire* does not mean, strictly, history, but something more like *Istoria*; an ample term implying a range from biblical narrative, ancient history, fable, poetry, allegory and action.¹² But Polyscope’s musings of 1795 are a reminder that for almost the entire existence of the regular Salon exhibition, the genre was meant to conform, one way or another, to a model of what George Nadel called “exemplar history”¹³, i.e. a storehouse of good and bad examples, didactic in purpose, based on ethics perceived to be *longue-durée*, if not eternal, encapsulated and diffused via grand narratives and heightened moments of exemplary character and action.¹⁴ I will explore two specific examples of the ways such models of history and history painting came under pressure from the unpredictable flows and forces of a more contingent and dynamic history: the press of events, what Fernand Braudel called “histoire événementielle” (event-driven history).¹⁵

12 On this concept see the venerable Rensselaer W. Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: the Humanistic Theory of Painting*, New York, 1967.

13 George H. Nadel, “Philosophy of History Before Historicism”, in *History and Theory* 3/3, 1964, pp. 291–315. Nadel argues that this model of understanding of history held sway until gradually challenged in the positivist writings of historians of the nineteenth century.

14 This kind of exemplarity and its importance to eighteenth-century history painting is most notably discussed in Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art*, Princeton, N.J., 1969, ch. 2, “The Exemplum Virtutis”, pp. 50–106.

15 Fernand Braudel, “Histoire et Sciences sociales : La longue durée”, in *Annales* 13/4, 1958, pp. 725–753; Fernand Braudel, “History and the Social Sciences”, in *On History*, tr. Sarah Matthews, Chicago, 1982, p. 27.

The Revolutionary half-decade between 1789-94 is the most obvious period of such tensions between the dizzying pace and gravity of events and the *longue-durée* of exemplar history – moments when the ‘time of a history painting’ (meaning the time between commission, conception and creation) and the ‘time of the exemplar’ (in the sense of a *longue-durée* ethical example history) conspired to render the genre problematic, and create specific conditions for disappointment. The first Post-Thermidorean Salon, in 1795, is thus unsurprisingly replete with untimely paintings. When François-André Vincent, then a *professeur* at the limping but still functioning *Académie royale*, was given an ‘encouragement’ of 5000 livres in 1791 by the *Assemblée nationale* to paint a Revolutionary subject, he began working on a very large-scale project commemorating the Jacobin exemplar of the early Revolutionary moment, *Guillaume Tell*. This he took from sketch (recently rediscovered)¹⁶ to finished work (fig. 1) between 1791 and 1794, as he – and France – lived through years of violence, trauma and loss, beautifully described by Cassie Mansfield in her book, *The Perfect Foil*.¹⁷ Mansfield, Cuzin and others have discussed the vicissitudes of Wilhelm Tell as an exemplar in the imaginary of successive waves of the Revolutionary process.¹⁸ However, when finally seen at the Salon of 1795, the painting – of impressive scale and a vertiginous ambition – seemed to induce a kind of awkwardness born of its own untimeliness. In the words of Amaury-Duval :

[...] et, en effet, un homme placé sur un bout de rocher, pousse du pied une barque déjà demi-ensevelie dans les flots : on voit encore le Tiran tout entier, et seulement renversé. Il *n'est point tombé, il tombe*. L'œil et l'esprit sont mécontents : on cherche comment il peut rester ainsi en équilibre. [...] *il ne faut pas peindre des hyperboles*. Les yeux sont des juges plus scrupuleux que l'imagination. Le poète a pu, sans choquer, décrire une action impossible ; le peintre ne devrait pas l'offrir aux spectateurs. Ou bien il fallait que son héros ressemblât à ceux d'Homère [...]

Mais son Guillaume Tell, quoique fortement musclé, est d'une nature ignoble. Son attitude est forcée, théâtrale, la grimace de son visage horrible. C'est un brigand, plutôt que le vengeur de sa patrie opprimée.¹⁹ [*emphasis mine*]

16 Now London, Baroni.

17 Elizabeth C. Mansfield, *The Perfect Foil: François-André Vincent and the Revolution in French Painting* (Minneapolis, 2011), esp. ch. 7, pp. 173–185; Jean-Pierre Cuzin, with Isabelle Mayer-Michalon, *François-André Vincent 1746–1816, entre Fragonard et David*, Paris, 2013, pp. 196–199, and cat. 534 pp. 476–477.

18 Mansfield, 2011 (note 17), and Joseph Jurt, “Les humains nés libres, nés égaux”. Guillaume Tell dans la tradition francophone”, in *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de La France* 105/2, 2005, pp. 285–300.

19 *Seconde lettre de Polyscope sur les ouvrages de peinture, sculptures, etc., exposés dans le grand Salon du Museum*. Coll. Deloynes 472, 547–548. Digital version at URL: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10523748k> (accessed 21.12.2023).



- 1 Francois-André Vincent, *Guillaume Tell renversant la barque sur laquelle le gouverneur Gessler traversait le lac de Lucerne*, after 1791, Oil on Canvas, 326 × 424cm, Toulouse, Musée des Augustins

Leaving aside the standard and well-worn critical complaints about history painting here (theatricality, ‘ignobility’, etc.), I want to focus first on the ‘disappointment’ (the eye and the mind are both displeased...) and the striking criticism: “Il n’est point tombé, il tombe”, and the warning to avoid hyperbole. For Amaury-Duval, firstly, the tense of the painting is wrong. The painting’s untimeliness brings an unwelcome odour of the recent and incomplete, of civil conflict and violence and unresolvedness – the tyrant “has not fallen” but is falling. He had dreamed of seeing paintings of a more stoic, example-based history of the recent French past coming to terms with its injustices, such as the depiction of the National Assembly not buckling under threat. Polyscope wanted exemplar history; Vincent’s *Guillaume Tell* represented instead a raw, embodied, lopsided and violent conflict, turbulent and unbalanced, an ongoing and uncertain struggle for justice against sly and tenacious tyranny, caught forever in a storm.

Tell (who, in Antoine-Marin Lemierre's influential pre-Revolutionary play, makes a bloodthirsty, rabble-rousing speech at the end of the piece about attacking all enemies, lusting for a "vaste carnage"), is a stark reminder of the rush, the flow of history, the elemental struggle at the heart of the Revolutionary process and the "esprit de parti" that necessarily propelled it.²⁰ This may have revolted spectators at the Salon, but the painting is more interesting to us now precisely because of this: its choice, finally, is to pay homage to the violence, threat and imbalance that the immediate moment after Tell's escape carries in the historical narrative. Vincent gives us history *in medias res*, unresolved, precarious, its coordinates and angles vertiginously unsettled, partly because the exhibited canvas is structured by the contrast of the unbalanced and even contorted bodies of villain and hero in Manichean struggle, rather than the more conventionally, plausibly posed opposition of his early idea; partly it is the transformation of Lake Lucerne into a wild, storm-tossed waterfall. Those very signs of contingency, tension and even trauma in Vincent's changes and choices that make the painting so interesting to us were the same that disturbed and disappointed the public at the Salon. Vincent's *Guillaume Tell* isn't so much untimely because it is late or out of sync; rather it presents a different, less complete, less palatable view of history than that desired, it seems, by Salon-goers in 1795 – not belated so much as a reminder of the unfinished.

If Vincent's exemplar history *in medias res* was unsettling in its choice of subject and moment, the firmer and more elevated ground of allegory proved no more fertile. At the same Salon of 1795, one obvious example of a prominent and much-anticipated history painting appearing static and stranded is Jean-Baptiste Regnault's *Liberty or Death* (liv. 424) (fig. 2: copy, Hamburg, Kunsthalle), whose original version (liv. 421), was another giant 'emulatory' commission from the heated moment of 1791 which hung in the seat of the *Conseil des cinq cents* for five years and was ultimately destroyed in 1872. The painting received an even more muted and disappointed reception than Vincent's. According to the accounts we have, this immense and confronting painting caused embarrassment and provoked amusement. Its size, stark factionalism, reminders of divisive festival banner culture and unsubtly contrasted light and dark all combined to strand this *grande machine* like a ghost ship, wrecked on the rocky shores of the Thermidorean Reaction.²¹ Allegory itself had not been undermined by the Revolution, as we know, and as we can see from the gleeful use of it in directly contemporary caricatures like those that circulated in 1795 on the subject of crimes of the Terror – more particularly Joseph Le Bon, who was put to death for his crimes more or less the same

20 "Que la flèche et l'épée, en doublant le ravage, Des bataillons rompus fasse un vaste carnage/ Qu'il ne leur reste enfin, pour arrêter nos coups/Que leurs débris sanglans semés entr'eux et nous". Antoine-Marin Le Mierre, *Guillaume Tell, Tragédie. Par M. Le Mierre. Représentée Par Les Comédiens François Ordinaires Du Roi... Le 17 Novembre 1766*, Neuchatel, 1767, V.v.

21 See for example "Avertissement Nécessaire a Lire", Coll. Deloyne 467, fol. 295-297. Digital version at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b105237724> (accessed 21.12.2023).



2 Jean-Baptiste Regnault, *La Liberté ou la Mort*, Oil on Canvas, 60 × 49 cm, Hamburg, Kunsthalle

week the Salon opened.²² But compared to the deft, humour-fuelled allegory of print caricature, Regnault's painting is not busy or messy enough; the orality and solidarity of the powerful *devise* of popular mobilisation, "La Liberté ou la mort", is hyperbolically

²² See *Les Formes Acerbes*, BM-1858, 0417.1551, and *French Caricature and the French Revolution*, exh. cat., Grunwald Center, University of California Los Angeles, 1989, cat. 152.

and clumsily ossified to absurdity. A message vital at street level becomes grotesque at the height and scale of history painting, a fact that questions the capacity of the *grand genre* to create allegory (the most elevated of all the missions of the history painter, according to Félibien, but as one commentator pointed out in 1795, almost never works in painting). This doubt and discomfort provoked the jokes, questions and sallies mentioned by many commentators. Furthermore, Regnault's painting, like Vincent's, presents a reminder of a much more present and continuing coercion, given that the phrase "La liberté ou la mort" was originally an invitation to military mobilisation and thus in 1795 likely resonated with every family member of a recently conscripted member of a *Demi-brigade*.²³ The even more pressing and disruptive noise of current events also impacted this allegory, as this was a Salon that witnessed, between its opening on 10 Vendémiaire (2 October) to its closing on 17 Frimaire (6 December), the ferment and the increasingly violent suppression of Royalist revolt by Menou de Boussay (aided by the young Napoleon Bonaparte) in Paris on 13 Vendémiaire. Regnault's allegory, with its bold assertion of clear-cut moral, national and political certainties was, though, almost the opposite of Vincent's, in that its layered but static allegorical register had no mechanism to embrace contingent complexities or the real urgent, nuanced, multifaceted choices for state and people.

"Au totale, une entreprise manquée": Saint Louis and history painting at the Salon of 1773

It might be argued that no language or regime of visuality could survive such an intense period of contingency as France experienced in the years 1791-1795. While that is true, I propose that untimeliness and the failure of exemplar history in history painting might be generalisable in *Ancien Régime* France even in moments of less vertiginous historical transition.

When history painting disappoints, it is easy to blame the judgement or execution of individual artists when what might be at play are the vulnerabilities, constraints and demands of the genre itself. One way of exploring this might be examining how not an individual painting but a collective enterprise of history painting is received when it goes on display at the Salon. There are places we can look for such collective moments, such as the 1727 or 1748 history painting competitions – but here I will focus on a notorious example from later in the century, the moment that Salon-goers encountered the series of paintings on the subject of Saint Louis that were commissioned by the ministry of war, in April 1772, for the newly built chapel at the École

23 Isabelle Laboulais, "La liberté ou la mort", in Georges Bischoff and Nicolas Bourguinat (eds.), *Dictionnaire historique de la liberté*, Paris, 2015. On conscription and the Revolutionary wars, see Timothy Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars, 1787-1802*, London, 1996.

militaire, a serial commission personally overseen by *premier peintre* Jean-Baptiste Pierre, who distributed subjects to adorn the newly constructed space. The series featured the then brightest talents of the senior ranks of the Academy, as well as some of its ‘rising stars’.²⁴ The paintings, with the exception of Doyen’s altarpiece, all had the same dimensions (214 × 289 cm – ‘portrait format’) to fit the spaces in the chapel. They were rapidly conceived and painted, and ten were displayed at the Salon of 1773. Thus, unlike in the examples discussed above, no major gap and certainly no political rupture existed between commission and execution. On the contrary, this was a remarkable ‘rapid response’ commission and thus a snapshot of the range of contemporary history painting talent at a moment in time. The communal subject was the exemplary life of Saint Louis, a canonised example of monarchical authority, heroism, wisdom and humanity. So, this was intended as pure ‘exemplar history’ in this French context. In every painting in the commission, the barely-disguised grafting of Louis XV’s countenance onto that of Saint Louis was a sign of this conflation of exemplar and the present – and surprising given that Louis IX’s visage was hardly an iconographical mystery, having become well known via the frontispiece in the widely diffused edition of Joinville’s text published in 1617.²⁵ The turnout in 1773 was a truly ‘collective’ barometer of how history painting was faring at this curious moment for the reign of the declining Louis XV, beset by various woes, and overshadowed by the marriage of the Dauphin. The collective display was the ‘fatted calf’, meant to demonstrate the vigour of a monarchy seen as war-ravaged and politically besieged, and was, like the personal interventions and new grip of Maupeou and Terray over of-

24 After peregrinations during the Revolution and the nineteenth century, many of these paintings are now back in place in the Chapel of the École militaire in Paris. Currently, plans are being made for their restoration in the context of the renovation of the site. See URL: <http://www.lequere.net/aem/chapelle/guide2/index.htm> (accessed 21.12.2023). The Livret numbers of the 10 paintings from the series that were exhibited at the exhibition were: N° 1. N. Hallé, *Saint Louis portant en Procession de Vincennes à Paris, la fainte Couronne d'épines*; 3. J.-M. Vien, *Saint Louis, à son avènement à la Couronne, remet à la Reine Blanche de Castille, sa mère, la Régence du Royaume*; 8. L. Lagrenée, *L'Entrevue de Saint Louis & du Pape Innocent IV*; 23. A. Vanloo, *Saint Louis, âgé de douze ans, présenté par la Reine Blanche, sa mère, pour être sacré*; 25. G.-F. Doyen, *Saint Louis est attaqué de la maladie épidémique, qui régnoit dans son Camp de Tunis...*; 27. N.-B. Lépicié, *Saint Louis rendant la justice sous un chêne à Vincennes*; 103. N.-G. Brenet, *Réception des Ambassadeurs des Tartares & le Vieux de la Montagne*; 104. H. Taraval, *Le Roi Saint Louis, âgé de 19 ans, épouse Marguerite, Fille de Raimond Bérenger, Comte de Provence*; 145. J.-A. Beaufort, *Saint Louis, Roi de France, étant près de Tunis pour en faire le siège, est attaqué de la peste...*; 162. L. Durameau, *Saint Louis, lavant les pieds aux Pauvres*. See *Collection Des Livrets Des Anciennes Expositions Depuis 1673 Jusqu'en 1800*. XXXVII. Exposition de 1773 / [Rééditée Par J. J. Guiffrey], 1869, URL: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k63720630> (accessed 21.12.2023), pp. 8–32.

25 See Jean de Joinville, *Mémoires de Jean, Sire de Joinville, Ou Histoire et Chronique Du Très-Chrétien Roi Saint Louis* / Publiés Par M. Francisque Michel ..., Paris, 1858, URL: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5493817d> (accessed 21.12.2023).

ficial art and culture in 1773,²⁶ a projection of a wider military and social authority. The stakes of its success were indeed elevated.

It is telling in these circumstances to find even the more official, sanctioned press barely able to disguise their disappointment about this ensemble. This was usually contextualised by reference to a ‘loss’ of talent (“Combien ne se plaint-on pas cette année de n'avoir rien de MM, Casanove, Fragonard & Greuze ?”), as the critic from the *Journal Encyclopédique* put it, in a review which began with a kind of apology and explanation of the fragility of history painting.²⁷ The range of tepid general welcomes for the paintings from the series at the Salon points to a barely-repressed official disappointment. And the talk was clearly negative, as the *Memoires Secrets* delighted in repeating the withering pun of the always pithy Sophie Arnould:

Jamais, dit-elle, le proverbe gueux comme un peintre ne s'est mieux vérifié qu'aujourd'hui, ou, à dix, ils n'ont pu faire cinq [Saint] Louis.²⁸

However, those critics who escaped censure via anonymity, or whose judgements became known only after private correspondence was published, were far more candid in their ‘disappointment’, and for them, I argue, it is not simply a matter of mocking individual incompetence but ruining collective general failure. In his funny and sensitive as well as stinging pamphlet, *Dialogues sur le Salon*, Antoine Renou made his characters not only disappointed but sensorially disturbed by the experience of the paintings. Of Durameau’s *Saint Louis, lavant les pieds aux Pauvres*, his principal imaginary interlocutor, M. Rémi, says: “On étouffe dans ce tableau, on étouffe.”²⁹

Most vivid in his disappointment is Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours, in his letters to Caroline Louise of Baden-Baden.³⁰ Du Pont first flatteringly laments the absence

26 On the Maupeou “Coup” see Durand Echeverria, *The Maupeou Revolution: A Study in the History of Libertarianism, France, 1770-1774*, Louisiana State University Press, 1985; Colin Jones, *The Great Nation: France from Louis XV to Napoleon*, Oxford, 2003, pp. 280-298. The Academy minutes are telling on the accommodation made, exactly around the time of the Salon, for the personal control of Terray – who alongside his role as comptroller was appointed Directeur and came, somewhat unexpectedly, to chair the Séance of 2 October 1773. See P/V, VIII, 136-139.

27 Fol. 674 of transcription ms. in Coll. Delyones 1327, Commentaires sur le Salon de 1773. Of [Anon.], “Lettre à M.*** sur l'exposition des tableaux, sculptures et gravures au Sallon du Louvre, 1773”, in *Journal encyclopédique* VII (October 1773), pp. 120-127. URL: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b105375366> (accessed 21.12.2023).

28 [Pidansat de Mairobert], *Salon de 1773*, transcription, Coll. Deloynes 912, p. 44. Digital version at URL: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10546370c> (accessed 21.12.2023).

29 Antoine Renou, *Dialogues Sur La Peinture, Seconde Édition, Enrichie de Notes*, 1773, p. 3. Digital version at URL: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84579155> (accessed 21.12.2023).

30 Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours, “Lettres sur les Salons de 1773, 1777 et 1779 : adressées par du Pont de Nemours à la Margrave Caroline-Louise de Bade”, in *Archives de L'art Français*, 2, 1907, pp. 1-123. [here pp. 7-15].

of a controlling intelligence (such as that of his connoisseur and collector correspondent) and the resulting lack of coherence and communication, favouritism and failure. There follows one of the most sustainedly vicious of all criticisms of French history painting and its talents in all of the critical literature of the pre-Revolutionary Salons. One of its thrusts is that the subjects are poorly chosen and lack ‘timeliness’ and relevance, and du Pont’s tone is marked by wistfulness. His ire with the scheme and with the paintings is most evident in his damning of Hallé’s contribution (fig. 3). He calls the painting: “Le premier du catalogue et le dernier du salon”³¹ and continues:

Un roi de France soutenant presque seul à la tête du pont de Taillebourg les efforts de l’armée anglaise et donnant à sa gendarmerie le temps de passer aurait offert un tableau bien plus propre à exalter l’âme et le courage des élèves de l’École Royale Militaire et à déployer les talents d’un grand peintre qu’il ne l’est marchant nuds pieds et souriant d’un air niais derrière le plus sot des archevêques, accompagné du plus laid des enfants de chœur, le tout agencé dans les proportions les plus mesquines et colorié comme des découpures qu’on aurait collées sur du papier bleu.³²

The subject appeared not only botched but ‘untimely’ to du Pont in 1773, perhaps because France was suffering a reversal of the centrality and glory that the crown of thorns was thought to have brought Saint Louis’ rule and dynasty. As Charles-François de Broglie’s secret document, the *Conjectures Raisonnés* of 1773 would argue, France was losing its place in Europe and the world, humiliated by the partition of Poland, deeply concerned about Britain’s naval supremacy, unsure of its allies:

Enfin, osera-t-on le dire ? par un déplacement incroyable, elle semblerait avoir perdu son rang à la tête des grandes puissances, pour ne pas jouer sur la scène politique qu’un rôle passif ou subalterne.³³

Now, while we cannot directly link the choices for the chapel of France’s military academy with the concurrent lurch into what – in secret – Broglie would call a crisis of status, we can perhaps speculate that the particular choices of subject and space were both charged with a task beyond them (to signal the military glory of France) and were ‘untimely’ as well as misplaced, given the lack of emulative resonance between the chosen suite of diplomatic and

31 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

33 Charles François de Broglie et al., *Politique de tous les cabinets de l’Europe, pendant les règnes de Louis XV et de Louis XVI ; contenant des pièces authentiques sur la correspondance secrète du comte de Broglie : un ouvrage dirigé par lui, et exécuté par M. Favier : plusieurs Mémoires du comte de Vergennes, ministre des affaires étrangères, de M. Turgot, etc. etc : manuscrits trouvés dans le cabinet de Louis XVI*, Paris, 1794, p. 96.

- 3 Noel Hallé, *Saint Louis transportant la Couronne d'épines*, Oil on Canvas, 214 × 289 cm, Paris, Chapelle Saint-Louis, Ecole Militaire



religious triumphs of the reign of Louis IX – the crusader saint whose long reign ushered in a “medieval golden age” of French centrality and power – and the late reign of Louis XV, beset with strife over religious authority, fractious reforms, Russo-Turkish manoeuvres, the partition of Poland and the depletion of its military and economic clout in Europe.³⁴ Once again, the power and authority of history painting as exemplar history was called into question and the Salon exposed the gap between the exemplar and lived experience.

Even Joseph-Marie Vien’s colourful *Saint Louis remet la régence a sa mère*, the “moins mauvais” of the paintings in du Pont’s view, pointed to other uncomfortably untimely

³⁴ See Michel Antoine, *Louis XV*, Paris, 1989, pp. 910–992; Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *L’Ancien Régime*, Paris, 1991, Vol 2, pp. 242–285.

resonances and provoked “disgust”. As du Pont pointed out, “Le légat du pape a beaucoup trop l’air de prescrire au Roi ce qu’il doit faire”.³⁵ This was awkward in the context of the publication in 1773 of the deliberations of the 1765–1766 Gallican Assembly that re-asserted the “Gallican liberties”, the independence of temporal authority from spiritual authority, and the complexity of relations with the papacy.³⁶ As the *Mémoires secrets* put it, “Une pareille cérémonie rappelle le joug ultramontain”.³⁷

But exemplar history in this series is victim not only of Braudel’s “histoire événementielle” but also his notion of “histoire conjoncturale”, or as in Wallerstein’s translation, cyclical history.³⁸ For example, Nicolas-Guy Brenet’s *La Réception de l’ambassadeur du Prince des Assassins* which evoked the accounts by Joinville and Matthew Paris of the visit in 1238 of the Lord of Alamut and the Abbasid Caliph seeking assistance in their fight with the Mongols. The painting was a reminder of the oscillating cycles of kingship and diplomacy – the pictorial rhetoric of the ambassadorial encounter, well established in ‘landscape’ format in French tradition, is awkwardly condensed and contorted here in a set of suspicious or ambiguous glances as well as a pervasive sense of inappropriate proximity that reverses roles, as du Pont put it, “Le Roi ne paraît pas digne des ambassadeurs”.³⁹ For the *Mémoires secrets*:

La contenance de l’envoyé n’est pas non plus assez humble, ne marque pas assez la distance immense qu’il devrait y avoir entre un vil chef d’assassins & un des potentats de l’Europe le plus puissant.⁴⁰

Uncomfortable proximity and unfortunate timing seemed also to haunt the painting by Lagrenée of Saint Louis meeting with Pope Innocent IV in Lyon. The fraternal embrace and balance of power (Saint Louis sheltering an exiled Pope and giving him support against the Holy Roman Emperor) fell flat at a moment when, as Dale van Kley has

³⁵ Du Pont de Nemours, 1907 (note 30), p. 10.

³⁶ *Procès-verbal de l’assemblée-générale du clergé de France, tenue à Paris, au couvent des Grands-Augustins, en l’année mil sept cent soixante-cinq, et continuée en l’année mil sept cent soixante-six. Monsieur l’abbé de Bausset, ...*, Paris, 1774. Digital edition accessed 11 February 2022, URL: https://numelyo.bm-lyon.fr/f_view/ See Dale K. Van Kley, “Church, State, and the Ideological Origins of the French Revolution: The Debate over the General Assembly of the Gallican Clergy in 1765”, in *The Journal of Modern History* 51/4, 1979, pp. 630–666.

³⁷ Louis Petit de Bachaumont, Mathieu-François Pidansat de Mairobert, and Barthélemy-François-Joseph Mouffle d’Angerville, *Mémoires Secrets Pour Servir à l’histoire de La République Des Lettres En France*, Depuis MDCCLXII, 13, 1783, p. 116. Digital version at URL: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k2066680> (accessed 21.12.2023).

³⁸ Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein, “History and the Social Sciences: The Longue Durée”, in *Review* (Fernand Braudel Center) 32/2, 2009, pp. 171–203. See also Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms*, Philadelphia, 2001, p. 137.

³⁹ Du Pont de Nemours, 1907 (note 30).

⁴⁰ *Mémoires Secrets*, 1783 (note 37), p. 112.

demonstrated, the sacral power of French monarchical identity had taken a near-mortal blow, and in the midst of the continuing religiopolitical crisis of the parliaments.⁴¹

Gabriel-François Doyen's much anticipated and outsized altarpiece – only tenuously clinging to the expected sacramental and iconographic proprieties of *maître-autel* paintings – was conspicuously the only one in which the painter's process of research had led him away from creating Saint Louis in the image of Louis XV.⁴² But this did not save his painting from the ire and disgust of audiences. It was overscale, inappropriate, and its secondary figures, including the king's son seen fetching the king's coat, seemed ill-judged: "Couldn't the son of Saint Louis be pictured doing something more august and appropriate?" asked the *Memoires secrets*, going on to rail against the use of colour that represented Doyen's attempt to capture his gothic subject's aura of splendour, which instead only invoked a visceral and active dislike: "Le spectateur repoussé par ce coloris dur et hagard baisse les yeux en maudissant le peintre et l'ouvrage".⁴³

As du Pont famously summed up the series:

De tout cela résulte un poème en dix chants, la plupart froids, n'ayant aucune unité ni dans les personnages ni dans le costume ; dix rois différents, cinq ou six reines, des anachronismes grossiers, au totale, une entreprise manquée.⁴⁴

This attempt at a magnificent edifice of exemplar history, was, for du Pont, lacking coherence, unity, and organisation. It was also, literally, 'out of time' (anachronistic), and a failure both of exemplarity and relevance, its conceptual and aesthetic unity collapsed under pressure from what might be called the emulation gap: the lack of fit between the many exemplary roles history painting was supposed to play, generally, and the realities of time, talent and circumstance. This was a failure of a collective enterprise, and I would argue, a genre. Outside its intended sacral and architectural setting in the *École militaire* chapel and transplanted to the somewhat cramped and certainly worldly confines of the Salon exhibition space, the series seemed to provoke not just annoyance but physical, visceral reactions: choking, repulsion, disgust.

To make matters worse, the one painting of which the taste and imagination seemed striking, and whose subject seemed to answer the call of commentators for a more 'battling' Louis, Restout's (fils) *The landing of Louis IX at the Port of Tunis* did not appear, as it was not finished in time (and was given its unique outing in Restout's

41 Dale K. Van Kley, *The Damians Affair and the Unraveling of the Ancien Régime, 1750–1770*, Princeton, N.J., 1984.

42 The painting measured 552 cm (h) × 325 cm (17 pieds × 10 pieds) whereas the other paintings all measured 292 cm × 195 cm (9 pieds × 6 pieds).

43 *Mémoires secrets*, 1783 (note 37), p. 110.

44 Du Pont de Nemours, 1907 (note 30), p. 14.

Revolutionary moment in 1791).⁴⁵ This very absence is, in fact, indicative of another commonality in history painting – the ‘no show’, the missed appointment, the delayed or absent canvas or artist, the great project that arrives late or never happens – from Peyron’s *Socrates sketch*, late and conspicuous by its absence in Martini’s engraving of the 1787 Salon,⁴⁶ to the grand and incomplete painting project of the *Oath of the Tennis Court*.⁴⁷

Many more moments of spectacular general failure of history painting may spring to the minds of Salon specialists, of course: the excitement of a *Coréus* or a *Serment des Horaces* is a rare event, while a muted or sometimes visceral disappointment, disquiet and displeasure with history painting is far more common. I believe that this cannot be explained entirely by the trend towards the contestation of academic or political doctrine in a pre-Revolutionary public sphere that ushered in Revolutionary modernity – many of the complaints and tropes of disappointment and disgust survived the Revolutionary process intact. The consistent ‘disappointment’ in history painting should not be considered simply a lazy habit of criticism – the discomfort, pain, disappointment and even revulsion that history paintings often provoke (on the evidence of the surviving critical testimony) are to be taken seriously. This is a fine-tuned, persistent perception and affective reaction of the thorny, imprecise – not to say doomed – project of the *Grand Genre*. Commissioning, making, teaching, seeing, and understanding history painting is an enterprise plagued by impossible examples, confused rules, and idiosyncratic human institutions, not to mention competing models of painting’s purpose and understandings of history and narrative. It is also a genre prey to the affective and sensorial realities of its public viewing, suffering many deaths by proximity, comparison and scrutiny, and devoid of some of the advantages of live and time-based performances to withstand this scrutiny. Thus, the Salon, while touted as the genre’s most glorious showcase, might be argued to be the most effective vehicle of its demise. The experience of audiences seemed – more generally than we would like to admit – to resemble that of Polyscope’s, confronting history painting’s physical, haptic and

45 *Explication des peintures, sculptures et autres ouvrages de Messieurs de l’Académie royale ...*, Paris, 1791, livret n° 46, URL: <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb327720223> (accessed 21.12.2023); interestingly, Saint Louis appeared more timely in this Revolutionary Salon than he had in 1773. Touzet’s *Saint Louis en Adoration* (livret n° 637) and Robin’s large-scale *Saint Louis rendant la Justice dans le bois de Vincennes* (livret n° 15) were also conspicuous in a Salon not otherwise well-stocked with Capetian or Bourbon imagery.

46 Pierre Peyron, *The Death of Socrates* (w. 133.5 × h. 98 cm, oil on canvas, Copenhagen, SMK); on this painting see Pierre Rosenberg and Udolpho van de Sandt, *Pierre Peyron, 1744-1814*, Neuilly-sur-Seine, 1983, pp. 61, 187; *Final Moments : Peyron, David, and ‘The Death of Socrates’*, Claudia Einecke (ed.), exh. cat., Omaha Neb., Joslyn Art Museum, 2001. For Martini’s print with conspicuous ‘empty space’ where Peyron’s work should be, see the etched state before engraving, British Museum 1856, 0308.183 (URL: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1856-0308-183, accessed 21.12.2023).

47 Philippe Bordes, *Le Serment Du Jeu de Paume de Jacques-Louis David : Le Peintre, Son Milieu et Son Temps, de 1789 à 1792*, Paris, 1983.

affective realities at the Salon in the disappointment of an abrupt awakening from a beautiful dream. If we are attentive to the grain of that disappointment, to its structural features, I believe we can construct a livelier, more nuanced *longue-durée* history of the genre as practice and as lived experience.

Image page 186 : Jean-Baptiste Regnault, *La Liberté ou la Mort*, Oil on Canvas, 60 × 49 cm, Hamburg, Kunsthalle (detail of fig. 2, page 194)