

Classicisms



CLASSICISMS

EDITED BY Larry F. Norman and Anne Leonard

SMART MUSEUM OF ART
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

CONTENTS

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Rococo Classicisms

Mapping Corporeality



I F YOU WERE suddenly to learn that a precious antique painting had escaped the ravages of time and that France was in possession of this treasure, how ecstatically this masterpiece would be received! It is here . . . in front of you.” These words of the art critic Pierre Chaussard referred to Jacques-Louis David’s *Intervention of the Sabine Women* (fig. 16), publicly displayed in 1799.¹ This was also when Maurice Quai, leader of a small group of disaffected artists in David’s studio, dismissed that same painting as “Vanloo, Pompadour, Rococo.”² The term “rococo” clearly referred to the aesthetic of Louis XV’s reign, rejected as antithetical to the classical ideal of harmony, dignity, and sublimity shaped at the end of the eighteenth century. This vision lingers in modern art history despite the important work of contemporary scholars complicating the definition of the rococo as a stable idea or category.³ To its contemporaries, David’s painting could appear “rococo” (in its emphasis on the epic clash, the possibility for doubt and fear to exist, the chaos of the background, and the multiplication of bodies) just as easily as it did “classical” (in the exemplary grandeur of its standing nude figures, which are firm, solemn, and dignified like Greek

statues). In a similar way, rococo’s visual aesthetic should be considered through the lens of its relation to the classical tradition and its roots in classical principles and models (those of the antique and the seventeenth century). As we will see, the result will be the emergence of a “rococo classicism”—a notion that should nourish modern discussions about the fluidity of aesthetic categories (as this exhibition and catalogue show) against a theological conception of historical time.

David conceived his painting as an embodiment of a new classical aesthetic: “I want to bring art back to the principles followed by the Greeks. In making the *Horatii* and the *Brutus*, I was still under the Romans’ influence.” This shift took place within the construction of corporeal expressiveness: “All the figures in my painting will be nude.”⁴ Grounding his aesthetic in the classical ideal of ancient sculpture, David assumed that the human body was the primary locus of expressivity in art. The artist should thus experiment with corporeal configurations in order to charge painting with meaning.⁵ As art historian Norman Bryson first pointed out, corporeality was a defining feature of rococo painting.⁶

16 Jacques-Louis David, French, 1748–1825, *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*, 1799. Oil on canvas, 152 x 206 in. (385 x 522 cm). Paris, Musée du Louvre, Inv. 3691



CORPOREAL IMAGES

Nicolas-Bernard Lépicié's *Academy as Narcissus* (fig. 17) is a clear and instructive example of a corporeal image born out of what is usually defined as rococo. The amorous theme (Narcissus falling in love with his own image), as well as the dominant color palette (the large areas of vivid pink on Narcissus's body and face), plainly pertain to the aesthetic of the reign of Louis XV. However, the conception, disposition, and role of Narcissus's body are derived directly from the classical idiom. The single body of the young man (naked, muscular) is invested with psychological complexity characteristic of multifigure narrative painting. Half kneeling at the water's edge, Narcissus has just stopped in front of the reflection of his own image; his raised arm suggests the surprise induced by this sudden encounter. The emphasis placed on the expressive potential of the body has reintegrated the narrative dimension of the ancient myth. To punish Narcissus for disdainful those who loved him, Nemesis attracted him to a pool where he saw his

own reflection in the water, at which he stared until he died. The development of formulas elaborated on the basis of this single figure was grounded at the same time in the craze for antique sculpture that painters at the time studied and for the classical aesthetic of the seventeenth century as established in Rome by Carlo Maratta (1625–1713) and his school: that is, an aesthetic defined by the preference for the body's eloquence over its role in a narrative. This insistence on the possibility for the body to speak—and for the soul to speak through the body—led to heightened attention to proportions, attitudes, and gestures, while the face (the neglected part of Greek sculpture) was assigned a minor role. Lépicié painted Narcissus's head in profile, leaning forward, and crossed by the dark shadow of his raised arm so that its legibility is diminished. Conversely, his expressive body is displayed in a bright, unnatural light that emphasizes its powerful anatomy.

The nineteenth-century sculptor Richard James Wyatt, who studied in Rome with prominent

17 Nicolas-Bernard Lépicié, *Academy as Narcissus*, 1771. Cat. 32



neoclassical master Antonio Canova (1757–1822), moved precisely from these principles to develop the classical aesthetic that embodies his marmoreal *Narcissus* in the Smart Museum of Art (fig. 18). The young man, sitting on a rock, bows to contemplate his reflection. He lifts his cascading hair to clear his view and better gaze at his image in the water. Yet in so doing, his folded arms hide his face and isolate him from the beholder. Unlike Lépicié, Wyatt

created an idealized body, molded by grace and softness. Lépicié's naturalistic Narcissus, however, is only the first stage in a creative process that would eventually lead to corporeally idealized images. *Academy as Narcissus* was followed by a second version showing the young man reclining, while his body, formerly held in tension, appears to have softened and relaxed (1771; Musée Antoine Lécuyer, Saint-Quentin). This creative process culminated

18 Richard James Wyatt, *Narcissus*, 1820–50. Cat. 69



19 Nicolas-Bernard Lépicié, French, 1735–1784, *Narcissus Transformed into a Flower Named After Him*, c. 1771. Oil on canvas, 34 5/8 x 55 1/8 in. (88 x 140 cm), Versailles, Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon



in the painting titled *Narcissus Transformed into a Flower Named After Him*, which was displayed as an overdoor in the Petit Trianon (salon de Compagnie) at Versailles (fig. 19). Here, Narcissus's attractiveness has been sublimated into pure beauty by death itself—his eyes are closed forever and his body has begun to metamorphose into the flower that carries his name. The quiver, arrow, and bow abandoned on the water's edge, as well as the dog depicted in a state of great agitation, define Narcissus as a hunter; Eros carrying a dying torch signifies the cause of his tragic end. But it is Narcissus's body, its disposition and relaxed corporeality, that epitomizes the myth—from the passion aroused in Narcissus by the image of himself in the water to the peace found in death and his transformation into a flower whose fragility and beauty were his own.

Lépicié's *Academy as Narcissus* stems directly from the life-drawing practice that was directed toward learning how to draw the human figure—the final phase of a strictly codified pedagogical regime established at the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture at its foundation in 1648. Such drawings are precisely where the shift occurred from

the representation of figures in action, defined by the exaggeration of physical gestures and facial expressions functioning through interrelationships (developed during the second half of the seventeenth century), to the representation of self-sufficient figures defined by a bodily eloquent immobility (a style that matured during the 1730s).

CORPOREAL EXPRESSIVITY

From the mid-seventeenth to the beginning of the eighteenth century, academy drawings had evolved according to the principles fixed by Charles Le Brun in his "Conférence sur l'Expression Générale et Particulière," a lecture given in 1668 to the Royal Academy. The king's chief painter (*premier peintre*) posited that the interior states of the figures in a narrative painting had to be exteriorized through facial expressions. The academy drawings executed by Le Brun's contemporaries (Henri Testelin and Noël Coypel, among other painters) stress the importance of facial over bodily expression. This preference is clearly summarized in a text published in 1680 by Testelin, whose arguments were mostly

Le Brun's, where he said, for example, that "the head may well be called the shortcut to the whole body."⁷ Moving away from this idea during the 1720s, however, artists developed a genre of academy drawings where the body not only replaced the face as the origin of expressivity but also became the site where a whole narrative could be contained and conveyed.

This is evident, for example, in academy drawings by Edmé Bouchardon and Jacques Dumont, where the figure exists in itself and still functions as a coherent image. In Bouchardon's academy (fig. 20), the figure sits with his face to the viewer while he gazes down and appears engrossed in his own thoughts, isolated from the surrounding world. This is also the narrative epitomized by Dumont's dead figure (fig. 21). Supine, foreshortened, it offers up a view of its abandoned body while its turned head is barely legible. The rejection of the expression of the passions through the face is finally emphasized by the artist's choice to represent the figure from behind, as in another Dumont academy discussed below. Before this time only Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) seems to have experimented with this kind of viewpoint. The Flemish painter had recorded antique sculptures from various angles in a series of drawings so that the view of the statue from the back would become an integral part of what can be considered a cognitive process (the goal being to apprehend the antique statue as a whole). Particularly significant are the drawings he made after the *Laocoön* showing how the suffering epitomized in the central figure's facial expression could also be read in the dramatically contracting muscles of its torso. Rubens's practice valorized the ensemble of the viewpoints whose potential was inscribed in the figure and fixed the body as the privileged site of artistic expression.

This shift, which modern art history has traditionally associated with the art of David, was thus already in process during the first half of

the eighteenth century. Academy drawings such as Bouchardon's and Dumont's anticipated and announced the ideal developed by David in paintings such as *Hector* (1778; Musée Fabre, Montpellier) or *Patroclus* (1780; Musée Thomas-Henry, Cherbourg), where a single body evinces complex and self-sufficient narratives. These eloquent corporeal images demonstrated that it was possible to suppress the head completely. This position raised negative reactions in the middle of the century. The most concrete of these was the institution of a prize for *Têtes d'expression* ("expressive heads") in 1759 by the Comte de Caylus (amateur and honorary member of the Royal Academy), which aimed to improve the expression of the passions through faces. However, this initiative did not have a real influence on the corporeal aesthetic, which continued to evolve through the century and fixed the expressive potential of and in the body. This remained the case even at the very end of the eighteenth century and during the first decades of the nineteenth, although academy drawings seem then to go back to the seventeenth-century tradition of more theatrical attitudes and movements. Take for example the Smart Museum's *Reclining Male Nude* (fig. 22), which, as its exaggerated musculature suggests, was very likely executed around 1800.⁸ The high expressivity of the body in tension is associated with the dramatic gesture of the figure's raised left arm to protect himself from an invisible threat. However, the head is in profile, and the face's expressive means (the eyebrow, eye, and mouth) are only sketched through black hatching.

The line that defines the body and fixes its internal qualities and movements through its expressive properties is an essential component of a corporeal aesthetic. Characteristic of the rococo is what the English painter William Hogarth called in his *Analysis of Beauty* (1753) the "serpentine line"—that is, an S-shaped line appearing within an object (or figure), as the boundary line of an object (or



21 Jacques Dumont, called Dumont le Romain, *Academy: Inverted Male Nude Lying on His Back*, undated. Cat. 12



figure), or as a virtual boundary line formed by the composition of several objects (or figures). Although Hogarth did not specifically intend his theoretical work to be a manifesto for the rococo, his conviction that beauty and grace could only be found in the serpentine line was the closest anyone in Europe came to offering a theoretical justification for the style. In the opening plate of his *Analysis of Beauty* (fig. 23), Hogarth showed the canonical greats of classical sculpture assembled in an imaginary open-air courtyard—the Farnese Hercules, the *Laocoön*, the Vatican Antinous, the Belvedere Torso, the Medici Venus, and the Apollo Belvedere. For Hogarth, the *beau idéal* was a supposed classical ideal, and the founding principles of the rococo aesthetic were

thus premised on the study of ancient systems of proportion. Dumont's academy, *Seated Male Nude Holding a Staff, Seen from Behind* (fig. 24), appears directly modeled on the Belvedere Torso as reproduced in Hogarth's plate. Dumont underscored the vigor of the model's powerful torso by detailing the muscles in tension. At the same time, he suggested its flexibility by emphasizing the S-shaped line of the vertebral column. Dumont's academy is an eloquent example of the overlap between classical and rococo aesthetics, between idealism and naturalism in giving shape to new forms of corporeality: "The elegant drawing of the antique sculpture, joined to the naïve nature," in the words of the king's chief painter, Antoine Coyvel (c. 1661–1722).⁹

22 Unidentified (French). *Reclining Male Nude*, c. 1800. Cat. 66



23 William Hogarth, British (English), 1697–1764, *Analysis of Beauty*, Plate 1, 1753. Engraving on paper, 15¼ x 19¼ in. (38.7 x 50 cm)



MERGING CORPOREALITIES

“Let us, if possible, by the force of the brush, make the figures of our paintings seem like the living models of ancient statues rather than the statues being the originals of the figures we paint.”¹⁰ At the beginning of the eighteenth century Antoine Coppel was not only reaffirming the filiation between the new corporeal images and classical statuary; he was also praising the possibility of bringing the antique to life in the present. An engraving by Gabriel Pierre Martin Dumont (fig. 25) shows precisely this merging of the antique and the modern. An artist is sitting under monumental classicizing vaults among antique ruins and fragments. He is drawing a seated female figure placed on a massive stone base. The classical setting implies that the artist is drawing from antiquity. However, the figure’s naturalistic posture and bodily proportions, and the fortuitous disposition of the drapery between her legs, all suggest that it could be a living model. But this is countered when we turn to the contemporary figures just below

her, whose proportions render her monumental in comparison: she is a statue once again, drawn from the past. This fusion of art and life, of artifice and naturalism, of organic and mineral is precisely what defines the rococo aesthetic.

Conceived as such, Dumont’s engraving can be directly linked to late nineteenth-century images produced with modern techniques, such as the black-and-white photographs taken in Italy by the German photographer Guglielmo von Plüschow. These pictures, showing naked men standing immobilized among the antique remains of Paestum and Pompeii (see figs. 49–51), offer the visualization of an imagined mythical past brought into the present. They celebrate antiquity through artificial images of tranquility and static immobility, where the models have been frozen to form an integrated whole with the classical architecture and the contemporary landscape. But Dumont’s engraving can also be related to an even more modern kind of artistic photography (“modern” understood here both temporally and artistically). That is the case of Joel Peter Witkin’s

24 Jacques Dumont, called Dumont le Romain, *Academy: Seated Male Nude Holding a Staff, Seen from Behind*, undated. Cat. 13



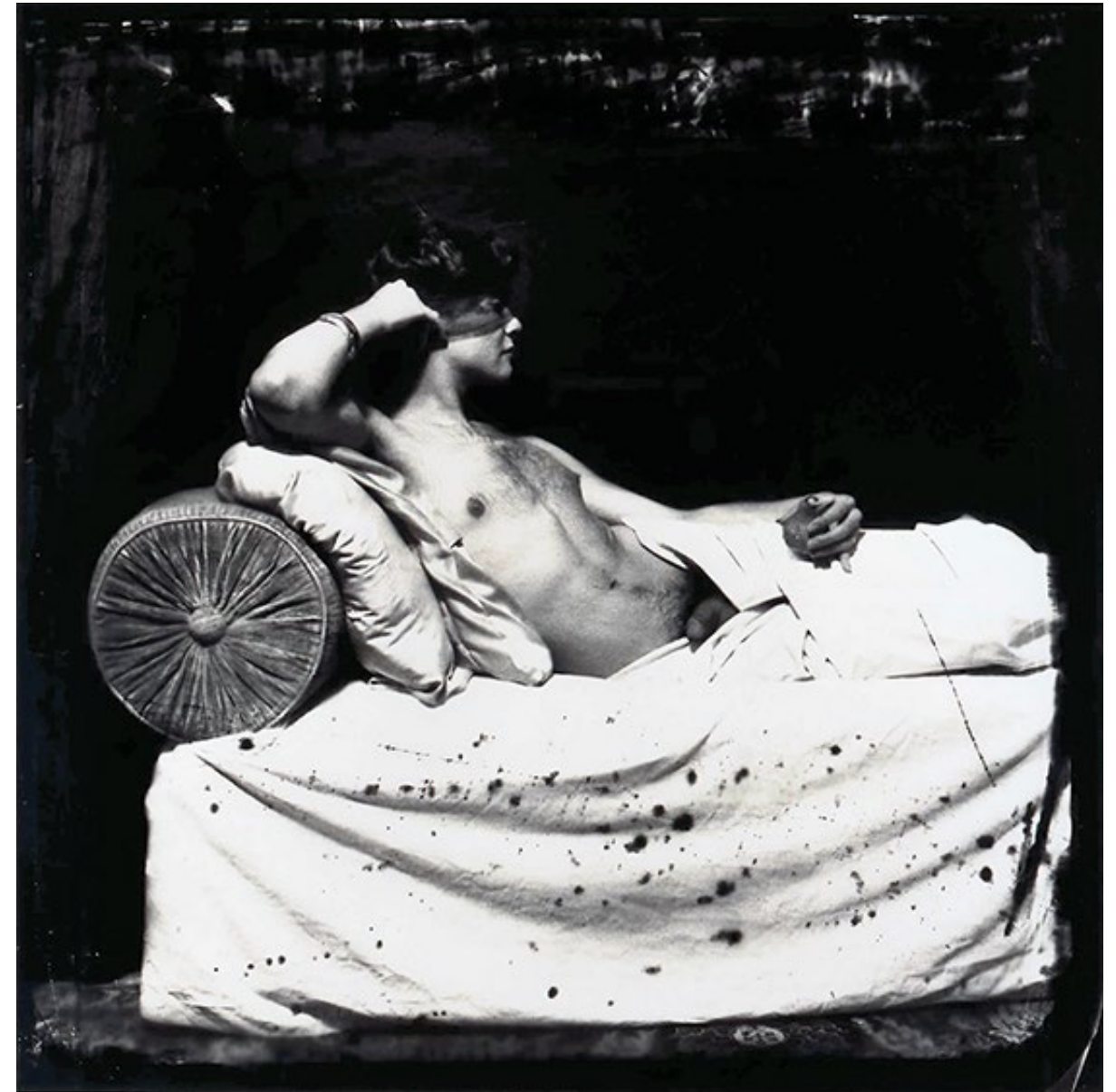


Canova's Venus (fig. 26), a contemporary reinterpretation of the famous sculpture of Napoleon's sister, *Paolina Borghese as Venus Victorious* (1804–08; Borghese Gallery, Rome; see fig. 54). Canova's sculpture is an allegorical portrait of a historical subject in the guise of the goddess of love (the model is holding an apple, signifying the judgment of Paris). It blends the classical tradition of displaying the eroticized female body as a seducer with the portrait of a specific aristocratic individual in idealizing neoclassical form. Witkin's photograph, by contrast, stages an androgynous model, anatomically male but feminized in its outlines and delicate features. As such, it displays what was considered as non-normative masculinity during the eighteenth century and associated with the rococo aesthetic. Witkin's work can thus appear as a twentieth-century example of

corporeal "rococo classicism," making clear that rococo and classicism resist precise periodization and aesthetic boundaries. Rococo and classicism can be considered as visual languages, cultural markers, or modes of expression that encompassed and assimilated styles. "Rococo classicism," therefore, must be understood as a diachronic concept, which aims less to create new aesthetic categories than to liberate itself from them.

NOTES

- 1 Quoted in Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, *Necklines: The Art of Jacques-Louis David after the Terror* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 145.
- 2 These artists were known variously as *barbus*, *primitifs*, or *médiateurs*. See Etienne-Jean Délécluze, *Louis David: son école et son temps* (Paris: Didier, 1855), 421, 426; C. T. Carr, "Two Words in Art History II. Rococo," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 1, no. 3 (July 1965): 266–81; F. Kimball, *The Creation of Rococo* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1943), 3–5.
- 3 See Melissa Hyde, "Rococo Redux: From the *Style Moderne* of the Eighteenth Century to Art Nouveau," in *Rococo: The Continuing Curve*, ed. Sarah D. Coffin, exh. cat. (New York: Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, 2008), 13–21; and Melissa Hyde and Katie Scott, eds., *Rococo Echo: Art, History, and Historiography from Cochin to Coppola* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2014).
- 4 Quoted in Lajer-Burcharth, *Necklines*, 131.
- 5 On David and corporeality, see Dorothy Johnson, *Jacques-Louis David: Art in Metamorphosis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Lajer-Burcharth, *Necklines*.
- 6 Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- 7 "La tête peut bien être dite le raccourci de tout son corps." Henri Testelin, *Sentiments des plus habiles peintres du temps sur la pratique de la peinture et sculpture, recueillis et mis en tables de préceptes avec six discours académiques* (1680), in Jacqueline Lichtenstein and Christian Michel, *Les Conférences au temps d'Henry Testelin, 1648–1681* (Paris: École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, 2006), 2:725.
- 8 My thanks to Alvin L. Clark Jr. and Perrin Stein for their connoisseurial advice on the dating of this work.
- 9 "Le dessein élégant de l'antique sculpture, Joint aux effets naïfs que fournit la nature." Antoine Coypel,



Épître à mon fils (1721), lines 89–90, in Jacqueline Lichtenstein and Christian Michel, eds., *Les Conférences entre 1712–1746* (Paris: École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, 2010), 1:34.

des statues antiques, que les statues, les originaux des figures que nous peignons." Antoine Coypel, *Commentaire de l'Épître à mon fils*, in *ibid.*, 1:124.

- 10 "Faisons, s'il se peut, par la force du pinceau, que les figures de nos tableaux paraissent plutôt les modèles vivants