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The Fantastical Neoclassical

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L'Antiquité rêvée: innovations et résistances au XVIIIe siècle

an exhibition at the Musée du Louvre, Paris, December 2, 2010–February 14, 2011, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, March 20–May 30, 2011.

Catalog of the exhibition edited by Guillaume Faroult, Christophe Leribault, and Guilhem Scherf. Paris: Louvre éditions/Gallimard, 500 pp., €45.00

Not all the works on view at the Louvre are traveling to Houston, where the exhibition, titled “Antiquity Revived: Neoclassical Art in the Eighteenth Century,” is supplemented with works from the Houston collections and elsewhere. The English-language catalog accompanying the Houston exhibition is also published by Louvre éditions/Gallimard (\$45.00).



Musée du Louvre, Paris

Jean-Honoré Fragonard: The High Priest Coresus Sacrificing Himself to Save Callirrhoe, 10.1 x 13.1 feet, 1765

The Comte d'Angiviller, Louis XVI's fine arts supremo, knew his man when in 1775 he picked the painter Joseph-Marie Vien to head the Académie Royale's program in Rome. It was time to reimpose some control on the headstrong young Frenchmen studying at the Palazzo Mancini, the Académie's Rome headquarters: and Vien, nearing sixty, was exactly the type of painter a reformist bureaucrat could work with. “Accommodating, prudent and wise,” ¹ Denis Diderot had called him, reviewing the previous decade's Salons. Diderot had also deemed Vien's *Marcus Aurelius Giving Aid to the People*—nine square yards of columns, tunics, and hand gestures—“harsh, dry, and flat.” ²

But then the sheer self-important dullness of the fellow would surely be of value in disciplining his charges—the prizewinning young painters who went, four each year, from the modern metropolis of Paris to breathe the air once breathed by the ancients, by Raphael, and by Poussin. Vien indeed took to his new responsibilities with zeal: he proposed to d'Angiviller that during their five-year

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intensive drawing course, the future leaders of French art should be made to wear special uniforms.



Château de Fontainebleau
Joseph-Marie Vien, *The Girl Selling Cupids*, 3.2 x 4 feet, 1763

Three decades earlier, Vien had been such a prizewinner himself. Then, on his return to Paris in 1750, he had fallen under the wing of the Comte de Caylus, an eminent antiquarian and art-world busybody. They enthused together over the excavations that had recently begun, three days' ride south of Rome, at Pompeii. The critic got the painter to attempt reviving the ancients' encaustic wax technique for painting—an experiment that led nowhere—then lent him freshly published

volumes of engravings after Pompeian murals. From these Vien derived a set of canvases that made something of a splash in the Salon of 1763. One of them, *The Girl Selling Cupids* (*La Marchande d'amours*), featured in “Antiquity Rediscovered,” the Louvre’s recent exhibition of eighteenth-century European art. It sets a hawker and her female clients more or less frieze-wise against a columned wall, in a manner adapted from Poussin. The three women seem dopyly demure cousins to those monotonous nudes painted by the Belgian Surrealist Paul Delvaux—but look again, and you realize that this is a Pompeian sex-toy party.

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Diderot disapprovingly smirked at the phallic gesture the salesgirl’s cupid figure is making, and the way one woman’s hand has covertly reached for her skirts. The canvas displays the debonair professionalism that pervades Parisian art of the ancien régime: its play of tints, pale rose against deep greenish umbers, is exquisite; but it’s a wholly daft confection, a whimsical jeu d’esprit you would surely hardly wish to repeat.

And yet art histories regularly cite the picture as a foundation stone of something called “neoclassicism.” Insofar as there is a narrative to “Antiquity Rediscovered”—an exhibition given permanent form by a handsome and scholarly five-hundred-page catalog—it recounts the reasons why Vien, this assiduous mediocrity, could look back as a venerable senator under the reign of Napoleon and congratulate himself on fomenting a cultural revolution. “Insofar,” I say, because the exhibition’s curators, in their sophistication, have come up with a historical scheme so multidimensional that it cannot really be reduced to a narrative sequence. In the process, they effectively explode the very art-historical category that, to judge by its title, you might suppose the exhibition was seeking to define. The revival of ancient art, it turns out, is but one of “the different artistic currents gathered up under the far from satisfying name of neoclassicism.”

Besides, if we talk of “antiquity rediscovered” we refer to a process in continual

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evolution since the days of Petrarch. From the early sixteenth century, when Michelangelo was inspired by the unearthing of the *Laocöon* and Raphael by that of the Domus Aurea, that process has pivoted on Rome. A fresh impetus came in the 1630s when Poussin attempted archaeological exactitude in his history paintings, while his fellow expatriate in the eternal city, François Duquesnoy, worked to unite ancient Greek and Christian values in his statue *Saint Susanna*.

The Louvre exhibition opened with early-eighteenth-century works that took up the project from there. There were portrait busts with Roman tonsures from Hanoverian England, one of several European states hankering to style itself on Augustan Rome, and there was *Cupid Whittling His Bow from Hercules's Club* by Edme Bouchardon, a winner of the Prix de Rome for sculpture. Here was a masterpiece of the 1740s that surpassed its antique prototype (a Roman copy after Lysippos) by virtue of its acute inner tensions and the uniquely crisp textures conferred on its marble: surely Bouchardon was in fact giving his own superb artistic riposte to the Bernini masterpieces he'd seen in Rome.

Louis XV took umbrage at it (was he himself not the Hercules whose club was being vandalized?), but it was exactly the type of art that Vien's mentor Caylus longed for—ambitious, deeply historically informed, a world away from the tinted titillatory froth pumped out all over contemporary Paris by the omniscient, exultantly nonintellectual François Boucher.

Caylus's painter protégé was hardly the man, though, to reverse that tide. *The Girl Selling Cupids* earns a place in history books partly because it navigated 1760s currents in decor. The pretty furnishings Vien dreamed up for his imaginary Pompeian boudoir fed into the repertory of contemporary cabinetmakers—gilt garland swags, fluted urns, lion's-paw table legs. Notionally, all such accessories were “Greek,” a label that became chic in Paris after the designer Louis-Joseph Le Lorrain used it to launch a collection in 1757. It had an edge on the more familiar “Roman”: it sounded rangier, better informed.

The Louvre exhibition showed this *goût à la grecque* cross-breeding with the already extant exoticism of chinoiserie—a pair of Kangxi vases cheekily sandwiched between lion's feet and Ionic capitals—and rubbing shoulders with the incipient taste for Egypt. France's master designers, in contrast to their coolly elegant British colleagues such as Robert Adam, were irrepressibly fantastical, and the move onward from rococo, the style associated with Boucher, did nothing to dim their appetite for spatial and structural paradoxes.

One motive behind that move, it's true, had been an oft-expressed yearning for “simplicity.” Bouchardon, according to one critic in 1746, possessed a “noble and masculine simplicity of the Antique” that set him apart from his contemporaries. Another, in 1751, found something “Greek” about the “extreme simplicity”³ with which Eustache Le Sueur had painted a hundred years before. Evidently here was a rallying cry that combined nostalgia for the *grand siècle* of Louis XIV with contemporary gender anxieties.

Women, many conservatives complained, ruled the roost nowadays: underneath the ubiquity of Boucher, one could see the power of his patron Mme de Pompadour, the king's mistress. But how far could one break free from this modern metropolitan complexity? When it came to history painting, the most honorific of the arts and the cause about which such critics felt most anxious, all but Caylus agreed that there was no help to be had from the frescoes unearthed at Pompeii: here, the ancients stood exposed as rank inferiors, with their ignorance of perspective.

And in fact most French history painting of the 1760s and 1770s pushed onward unabashedly with the sophistications of the immediate past. The whole imaginative weighting of “Antiquity Rediscovered” resettles around one magnificent example. *The High Priest Coresus Sacrificing Himself to Save Callirrhoe* was the painting with which Jean-Honoré Fragonard launched his public career in 1765. It is a huge canvas, over ten feet high: wildly operatic, employing gilt sphinxes and garlanded urns to dramatize a recherché Greek legend, and as masterful in its invention of light and color as anything in Italian painting after Titian. From an offstage setting sun, a shell-burst of radiance

plunges between some temple's dark pillars, its shimmer shaking down to reveal a host of altar ministrants.

The light-explosion's epicenter is the bared bosom of an intended sacrificial victim, the fair Callirrhoe: and yet the glare travels on from her prone body to catch the arm of the administering priest Coresus, which curlingly thrusts a dagger in his own breast instead. If the gods require blood, for the love of her he wills it must be his own. This whole melodrama, one intuitively—this orgasmic suicide, and analogously this vast voluptuous canvas—is an offering so as to gratify, and yet at the same time it is an utterly gratuitous act. It heads nowhere but inward; it is mere art.

Here was a masterpiece that got its due. The crown immediately bought it and ordered from Fragonard a sequel. The enthusiastic Diderot, noting how crowds swarmed around *Coresus* at the Salon, also noted that it had the evanescence of “a beautiful dream.”⁴ Which was shrewd: for having made his point, Fragonard saw no point in making it again. He would never produce a sequel, and after twenty-five years of brilliant, insouciant, but much-smaller-scale production, he would drop his brushes to end up as an obscure functionary at the post-revolutionary Museum of the Louvre.

That museum's present curators now line up this great hero *manqué* of French history painting with artists such as Goya, born fourteen years later: and this is not unreasonable, for both were building up their art on an appreciation of the best in recent Italian painting, above all on Tiepolo. (Goya was represented in the exhibition by *Hannibal Crossing the Alps*, a recently rediscovered and rather hammy apprentice piece done while in Italy in 1771.) More contentiously, they label this vein of artistic development “neobaroque.” That suggests that there was something revivalistic about it, which I don't see as true.

And yet, undeniably, Paris would shoulder that line of work aside by the time of the Revolution. How is it that as of 1789, “modern” and “antique” had become synonymous? The petticoat-bestrewn reign of Louis XV drew to a close in 1774. The succeeding administration's cultural intentions were soon articulated by d'Angiviller: titillation must make way for edification, for a sober, constructive, and virile public spirit. D'Angiviller knew that Vien would make a serviceable vehicle for these directives. But he could hardly dream how they would bear fruit: for among's Vien's charges, as he made his way to Rome in 1775, was the young Jacques-Louis David. The story of how, driven by unaccountable inner compulsions, David veered away from his early allegiance to Boucher, via a personal submission to Vien and an extended immersion in modern Roman painting ranging from Caravaggio to Poussin, has often been told, but its dénouement—the 1784 *Oath of the Horatii*, hung near the end of the exhibition—still retains a power to shock.



Musée du Louvre, Paris
Jacques-Louis David: Oath of the Horatii, 10.8 x 13.9 feet, 1784

The massive government-commissioned canvas, even larger than *Coresus*, hums with malign electricity at every point of its close-woven surface: a psychic convulsion in high definition, the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* as painted by Magritte. The “harsh, dry, and flat” for which Diderot berated Vien stand revealed as three virtues, and segregation of the sexes has become the order of the day. To this side, let the brothers bond, consigning themselves to patria and patriarchy: to that side, let the sisters grieve, prophetically. For at the end of this episode of archaic Rome—looking past the tribal combat immediately to follow—brother will slay sister. There, at last, you have the “simplicity” you asked for—or at any rate, you have an art event that was, as one of the astonished visitors to the 1785 Salon expressed it, “absolutely new.”

he aftershocks of that novelty have hardly settled down yet: they spilled out

T into a revolution that certainly played no part in the painting’s conception and that yet just as certainly drew on the picture for its look and its spirit. (David would go on to observe the deputies involved in the Tennis Court Oath imitating the very gestures he’d invented.) And from the Revolution, they spill out into genealogies of allegiance, so that the neoclassical—meaning in this case the imitative visual culture that sprouted up in the *Horatii*’s wake—is still sometimes felt to have progressivist connotations. I suppose that’s why, in their exhibition subtitle, the Louvre curators term the artistic currents that did not fall in with the new Davidian regime “resistances.”

The painting remains, then, a resounding novelty: but not, for historians, an “absolute” one, since it is their business to find causes. Some, ⁵ struck by the picture’s stark architecture, have looked for links between David and the designer Étienne Boullée, who was concurrently dreaming up titanic public buildings of the utmost geometrical severity. Boullée drawings featured in the exhibition, alongside 1780s projects from London and elsewhere: “never,” the curators noted, “have more terrifying prisons been imagined than during this relatively peaceful period.” But the architects’ reach for a giddy, superhuman scale requires a cause in turn, namely the dissemination of Piranesi’s mind-boggling prints of Rome.

Piranesi came to Rome in the 1740s, from a training in Venetian stage design with all its perspectival trickery. Over the next three decades his images of the city’s ruins offered Europe a uniquely potent “antiquity rediscovered”—presenting a past that was mutilated yet could still crush modern viewers with its titanic splendor. These prints were somewhat marginalized at the Louvre, though one saw plenty of their influence in the ruin-filled canvases of Fragonard’s friend Hubert Robert. Nonetheless the city they represented was clearly, together with Paris, one of the twin hubs of the eighteenth-century art system. It was its out-of-town campus, in effect: a concourse where artists from far afield—not just from Paris and Venice, but from Germany, Scandinavia, the British Isles, and America—might come to study the antique and exchange new ideas. Naturally, if we want to trace the reasons for the great change that hit Paris in the 1780s, it makes sense to turn to that interplay.

For instance, by 1786 d’Angiviller was getting alarmed that his cultural project was sliding out of control: most of his history painters, he fretted, were now going for “*sujets noirs*.” Surely that turn to the grim and ominous, supremely represented by the *Horatii*, must connect to contemporary developments in London, where Henry Fuseli—a Swiss-born, Rome-trained immigrant—was staggering viewers with his bombastic phantasmagoria *The Nightmare*. Was it in Rome that the two art scenes, Paris and London, hooked up? The curators put together two slightly earlier works conceived by visitors to Rome: a *Belisarius* painted by David and a quite similar *Belisarius* drawn by that most thoughtful of English painters, Joseph Wright of Derby. Inconveniently, the latter left Italy a few months before the former arrived. But who knows, perhaps he left a copy of the sheet behind....

That is the manner in which the team responsible for the exhibition likes to speculate. That team comprises Marc Fumaroli writing on the French cultural setting and Thomas Gaetgens on scenes beyond; Guillaume Faroult and Guilhem Scherf, Louvre curators of painting and of sculpture; Christophe Leribault, tackling decorative arts; joined by Christian Michel, who adds a stimulating overview of historiographical issues. These scholars are collectively intent on assembling a historical model with multiple interconnecting nodes, able to embrace the Stockholm sculptor Johan Tobias Sergel as well as the Madrid painter Luis Paret y Alcazar. As Faroult at one point puts it, “We have no doubt got away from a vision of Enlightenment Europe that is unduly gallocentric.”

T hat corresponds to a familiar observation about the period: the fluidity with which tracts moved around the continent. But history has more bite if we view it from a certain somewhere, and there are reasons to suspect that gallocentrism remains quite a useful principle. By 1766, blasé, art-surfeited Parisians were able to refresh their sensibilities with the novel ideas, newly

translated, of Edmund Burke and Johann Joachim Winckelmann. The young Irishman had rethought the notion of “the sublime” with a very scant experience of visual art to guide him: that was what gave his formulations their piquancy. Likewise, Winckelmann’s resounding salute to the “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur”⁶ of Greek art had been drafted before he ever stepped outside northern Germany. Parisians may have found these outsider perspectives intriguing, but could they take them wholly seriously? Marc Fumaroli, in a catalog essay distinguished by its sympathy for Caylus, France’s great advocate for the antique, remarks that he would certainly have deemed Winckelmann’s ideas “excessive and idolatrous” and Burke’s quite simply “alien.”

Burke asked nothing of visual art: he believed that his “sublime”—a high-class adrenaline rush, as we might now put it, a shot of existential danger, “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling”⁷—came through far better in poetry. It was left to the likes of Fuseli to respond to that challenge to painters. Winckelmann asked much of visual art, requiring it to cast aside its accumulated modern resources in favor of the linear purity he imputed to ancient Greece. And much visual art, in various ways, would attempt to meet that demand.

It’s hard nowadays to think that highly of the responses devised by Anton Raphael Mengs, the German painter acolyte Winckelmann collected when he arrived in Rome, but many other German and British achievements—John Flaxman’s ultra-minimal designs, for instance, from the 1790s—have an enduring appeal. At the same time, as Guillaume Faroult points out, much “neoclassical” art was actually pitted against Winckelmann’s ideal of “quiet,” of reserved and inexpressive calm: sculptural experiments such as Thomas Banks’s *Falling Titan* of 1786 were meant to shock and disrupt. And it remains doubtful whether either theorist had much effect on French studio practice.

The reason for picking away like this at the cohesiveness of “the Enlightenment,” that much-loved historical construct, is that while the trans-European survey assembled by the Louvre team may hold together handsomely on the page—each of their catalog essays is an eloquent joy to read—it flies apart in the gallery. The exhibition was babel. Profoundly incompatible visual languages kept butting in on one another. An arch and sensuous marble by Falconet, a Piranesi print of Paestum, and a pidgin-Poussinesque history painting by the Pennsylvanian Benjamin West may all ostensibly make reference to the antique, but spiritually and stylistically, they hardly belong in the same universe, let alone the same room. Since these works refer to the antique, the Louvre curators seem to have told each other, why don’t we make room for the antique? We’ve got a Roman sarcophagus upstairs, and a Poussin as well: let’s bring them in.

But if you try using physical works of art to illustrate a thesis, they bite back. They carve their own imaginative force fields out of your gallery space, transporting the viewer to yet more incommensurate zones of sensibility, and the confusion of the hang gets compounded. Even more so when you conjure up a category called “neomannerism” to add to your “neobaroque”—with the result that paintings by both Parmigianino and Tiepolo get invited inside for comparison. All that this “neomannerism” seems to denote is that whether or not eighteenth-century artists wished to draw on the antique, they couldn’t lean on it exclusively: they would also need more recent models of practice, and these might come not only from Poussin but sometimes from the followers of Raphael and Michelangelo. There’s no “ism” about that, in the sense of concerted stylistic movement.

Fuseli’s *Nightmare* may make an arresting cover image for a catalog entitled *L’Antiquité rêvée*. But the painting’s crude use of oils and its strident interpretation of the pictorial sublime set it at odds with everything about the French art on display: nor does the picture have anything to do with “antiquity.” Was that in fact the point that the exhibition was trying to make? That we must abandon the unifying period label of “neoclassicism” if we want to account for the explosively diverse visual culture of late-eighteenth-century Europe? It would rather seem not: not, at any rate, if we are to go by Thomas Gaehtgens, who in the catalog envisages neoclassicism as the last “common language” that Europe

possessed before the Romantics erected the barriers of nationalism.

But possibly the subtler unity of the exhibition has been lost in translation. Taking the winding tour of its galleries, a cumulative eeriness stole up on me. Think Delvaux, think Magritte, and think how they shared an art-movement umbrella with the visually dissimilar Joan Miró and Max Ernst.... Surely one was encountering an eighteenth-century antecedent to Surrealism, in this transnational scrabble of maneuvers in relation to an antiquity that may or may not have been “rediscovered” but was most certainly, as the French title put it, *rêvée*. The “dreamed” aspects of the period’s art, its slippery fantasticality, became increasingly insistent, indeed almost intolerable, by the time the show reached its historical terminus in 1800—the point at which Antonio Canova, the master-sculptor of Napoleonic Europe, made his appearance in the display. Insofar as the show delivered a narrative—again, “insofar”—it gets summarized by Christian Michel in the catalog when he writes of a generational impulse “to break with an art that took for its sole objective the seduction of the senses.” Away, then, with fleshly titillation—but also away with materiality, with realism. Speak to the mind in the mind’s own accents, linear, pallid, ethereal.

Though how you square that with a selection that includes the sensationally realist portrait busts of Jean-Antoine Houdon, I don’t pretend to grasp. I am left with a dream of my own, of an exhibition that brings together all the Salon-stoppers from the age of Mme de Pompadour to the age of Napoleon inside one great room. At one end there’s Fragonard’s *Coresus* and at the other David’s *Horatii*, and they’re arguing it out rather in the manner that two Germans in Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, a highbrow musician and a druggy lowlife—outrageous sentimentalists, the pair of them—argue it out over their favorite composers in the ruins of Hitler’s Berlin. “While Rossini was retiring at the age of 36,” protests the first, “womanizing and getting fat, Beethoven was living a life filled with tragedy and grandeur.” “So?... Which would you rather do? The point is,” the other replies, “a person feels *good* listening to Rossini. All you feel like listening to Beethoven is going out and invading Poland.” ⁸

1 Denis Diderot, "The Salon of 1767," translated by John Goodman in *Diderot on Art* (Yale University Press, 1995), Vol. 2, p. 30.

2 Diderot, "The Salon of 1765," in *Diderot on Art* , Vol. 1, p. 36.

3 Jean-Baptiste de La Curne de Sainte-Pallaye, in a translated text included in the anthology *Art in Theory 1648–1815* , edited by Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Jason Gaiger (Blackwell, 2000), p. 580.

4 Diderot, "Salon of 1765," *Diderot on Art* , Vol. 1, p. 148.

5 See for instance the stimulating short book by Anna Ottani Cavina, *Geometries of Silence* (Columbia University Press, 2004).

6 *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechische Werke in Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (1755).

7 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), I.VII.

8 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (Viking, 1973), p. 440.
