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Sébastien Allard and Marie-Claude Chaudonneret, *Le Suicide de Gros: Les peintres de l'Empire et la génération romantique*. Montreuil, France: Gourcuff Gradenigo, 2010. 159 pp. Notes, index, illustration list, and 60 illustrations. 29.00€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-35340-090-4.

Review by Patricia Mainardi, The Graduate Center, City University of New York.

If our conception of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century art history was set by Walter Friedlaender's magisterial *David to Delacroix*, then the art historical revisionism of the last decades has endeavored to dismantle this interpretation, which was based on the transformation of the Classicism of Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) into the Romanticism of Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863).<sup>[1]</sup> In the canonical reading that Friedlaender established, Antoine-Jean Gros (1771-1835), David's favorite student, was the heir apparent who carried on his master's legacy, transforming his Classicism into the "Protobaroque" through his Napoleonic battle paintings.<sup>[2]</sup> Gros's work after Waterloo has been of little interest to anyone, however. Not only Friedlaender, but even subsequent revisionists have given short shrift to the later Gros: Thomas Crow's *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France*<sup>[3]</sup> focuses on Gros's earlier career, as does David O'Brien's *After the Revolution: Antoine-Jean Gros, Painting and Propaganda Under Napoleon*.<sup>[4]</sup> In both canonical and revisionist art history, Gros has been identified with his Napoleonic paintings; his 1835 suicide, when mentioned at all, is attributed to personal factors: the harsh criticism his later work received from the critics and his unhappy marriage.

Marie-Claude Chaudonneret and Sébastien Allard have taken a fresh look at Gros's later career, using his suicide as a point of departure for a study that is not so much a monograph on the artist as an investigation into the shifting art institutions and career patterns of the post-Revolutionary period. With its poetic title, it recounts a tragedy almost Greek in its inexorableness, as one career path after another is closed to Gros, so celebrated under Napoleon, so forsaken in the Restoration and July Monarchy; by the end his suicide becomes an almost inevitable conclusion. *Le Suicide de Gros* is a valuable book that will resonate throughout the art historiography of the period for its close analysis of the beginnings of our modern system of art production, distribution, and reception, as well as for its insights into the career trajectory of one of its major artists.

The book opens with a critique of art historiography, noting that our preference is always for careers that end in ascendancy or apotheosis, like those of Ingres or Delacroix, not in slow decline and suicide like that of Gros (pp. 9-11). Subsequent chapters treat each of the new factors in a changing artworld: the rise of the Salon as the essential art institution for the construction of careers, the collapse of the official commissions that made Gros's reputation, the creation in 1818 of the new Musée du Luxembourg for living artists, the installation of the art looted by Napoleon in the Louvre, leading to new forms of sociability among young artists that replaced loyalty to one's teacher, and, lastly, the contestation of the very definition of history painting on which Gros had based his reputation.

The authors' basic premise is that these shifts in the art world had very different effects on the different generations of artists. David's early students [Anne-Louis Girodet (1757-1824), François Gérard (1770-1837), Antoine-Jean Gros (1771-1835)], along with Pierre-Narcisse Guérin (1774-1833), had careers well established before Waterloo. Artists who came of age later, J.-A.-D. Ingres (1780-1867), Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), had to make their way in a world in which

commissions were largely replaced by purchases at the Salon, and where Salon success depended on public opinion and critical opinion. For earlier artists such as Gros, then, the period after 1815 represented a “crisis of adaptation” (p. 10).

A hallmark of Chaudonneret’s scholarship has been her refusal to establish a too-close relationship between political events and art historical events. Here she and Allard cite 1810, not 1815 as the definitive date, proposing that the earlier date’s art historical importance has been overlooked because of the political importance of Waterloo. It was in 1810 that the Prix Décennaux were announced (but never awarded), when David was passed over for the highest honors that went instead to Girodet, his student; Gros received nothing. For Chaudonneret and Allard, this event marked a critical moment in the world of art, presenting the heretofore inconceivable possibility of a student superseding his master, youth triumphing over age (pp. 25–26). The shockwaves of this event were soon followed by the Salon of 1814 that spanned both the Empire and the Restoration; artists were allowed to show older works, but Gros could not exhibit his major Napoleonic paintings, quickly consigned to storage by a Restoration monarchy that had no desire to publicize the exploits of its defeated predecessor.

Through an impressive use of primary documentation such as archives and private correspondence, the authors trace the attempts by each of the major artists to adapt to the new order of things: Guérin and Girodet turned to private patronage, with Guérin eventually retiring from painting to focus on teaching, and Girodet, ailing, painting less and less. Gérard became a society painter, the “Premier Peintre du Roi” (Delacroix called him a courtier) (p. 34). Gros’s career had been based on official patronage, however; for him the shift from the propaganda paintings of contemporary history to the traditional history paintings that the arts administration now preferred to purchase at the Salon proved difficult. Gros never understood the increasingly important role of public opinion, with the critic as mediator between the artist and the public. Crowds in front of a painting signified popularity, which in turn increased the likelihood that the work would be bought by the State. The authors trace the strategies that artists developed to increase their visibility vis-à-vis the public and they recount numerous examples, such as artists intentionally sending work late to the Salon so that critics would write about its arrival as “news”; Gros respected the deadlines so lost out on subsequent publicity. Gérard held private salons to which those of power and influence were invited; Gros, by all accounts, was a curmudgeon. Artists deliberately chose provocative subjects. Ingres’s *La Grande Odalisque* of 1814 challenged traditional ideas of history painting (p. 74). Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa* (exhibited as simply *A Shipwreck* though everyone knew the real referent) caused the first Salon succès du scandale (pp. 110–11); nonetheless, it entered the Louvre in 1824, shortly after Géricault’s death, while Gros was still struggling to be represented in the Luxembourg. Talent was no longer enough; the artist had to become an impresario of his career, choosing Salon submissions carefully to attract critics, public, and a State art administration that rarely commissioned works in advance, but compelled artists to work “on spec,” with success coming in the form of later purchases.

Nor was success simply a matter of public relations; one of the authors’ most intriguing propositions is that episodic, fragmentary open-ended painting replaced the closed compositions of classicism (p. 114). Actions taking place “off stage,” with the painting’s protagonists looking or gesturing out of the picture, set up a deliberate dialogue between the artist and the public, which added to the work’s appeal. The authors conclude that the new route to success led from Salon notoriety to purchase by the State, entry into the Luxembourg Museum for living artists, and, ultimately, to posthumous entry into the Louvre (pp. 114–16).

A wealth of evidence is provided for this proposition. They note, for example, that beginning in 1812, the Salon no longer identified artists as “Student of...,” thus foregrounding individuality rather than the traditional master /student lineage. With the arrival of the looted masterpieces of European art in the Louvre, the conception of art history widened, and the museum served as an alternative cite of learning and sociability for young artists who had previously remained within their own ateliers, under the

influence of their chosen master. The museum also provided a choice of masters to copy, an alternative to traditional training based on antique and Renaissance models (p. 116). Ingres's archaizing style, for example, was learned in the Louvre, not in David's atelier.

Most convincing is the section proposing that the traditional career route had become increasingly unattractive to young artists. Even the Prix de Rome, once the guarantor of a successful career, was now perceived as a waste of the years necessary to build a reputation. Young *pensionnaires* in Rome began sending paintings directly to the Salon in violation of accepted practice, which regarded their sojourn as a period of learning, not exhibition; since such paintings proved popular with Salon goers and were even bought for the Luxembourg, fast-tracking their careers, the Academy was forced to acquiesce. As a result, later artists such as Delacroix refused to compete for the Prix de Rome or, having received it, focused their energies on Salon paintings instead of the student work they were subsidized to produce.

At each turn, the authors show how Gros could not adapt to these changes. As an artist, he was identified with Napoleon and the Empire, his earlier paintings regarded as propaganda for a fallen regime. Compelled to begin his career anew, his later paintings, even the magnificent *Acis and Galatea* (Norfolk, 1833) continued in the Davidian style, based on Renaissance/Baroque models now *démodé*; David himself, in exile in Brussels, had abandoned his own earlier style in favor of inspiration from Northern masters. As Gros said to Vigée-Lebrun a few days before his suicide, the only ill was "to outlive oneself" (p. 23).

This book is a valuable corrective to an art history that is still too closely focused on individual careers and achievements. It is so densely argued, with numerous intriguing and convincing examples, that a brief review can only suggest its scope. By reinserting Gros within his milieu, the authors have illuminated not only his own career, but the beginnings of the art world that we have inherited. With its wealth of archival research, supported by splendid color illustrations, the authors bring to life the tragedy of a great painter caught in the riptides of history.

## NOTES

[1] Walter Friedlaender, *David to Delacroix*, trans. Robert Goldwater (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1952); orig. *Von David bis Delacroix*, vol. 1 of *Hauptströmungen der französischen Malerei von David bis Cézanne* [Leipzig: Velhagen und Klasing, 1930].

[2] Friedlaender, *David to Delacroix*, pp. 51-66.

[3] Thomas Crow, *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995).

[4] David O'Brien, *After the Revolution: Antoine-Jean Gros, Painting and Propaganda under Napoleon* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

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