

“A Great and Noble Painting”: Léon Gambetta and the Visual Arts in the French Third Republic

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Many scholars have explored the relationship between the coming to power of the Republicans in the 1870s and changes in the arts, as well as relationships between Republicans and artists. In recent years, reacting against a tendency to consider aesthetics in isolation, a number of studies have focused on arts institutions and on the roles of individuals – arts administrators, artists and policy-makers – in driving the changes that occurred in this period. These studies explore in detail the forces shaping art production and management in the early Third Republic. They also demonstrate that the Republicans resembled their predecessors in seeking to use art to shape a national identity.¹

Interesting questions remain, however, about the Republicans’ personal responses to art and whether (or how) their aesthetic preferences influenced their policy-making. Indeed, some are convinced that the Republicans were largely uninterested in art, despite their interest in arts policy. Miriam Levin singles out five individuals who “were unique among the Republicans, largely because of their interest in art.”² Even so, her study focuses more on the ideological positions adopted by her subjects than on their aesthetic responses.

Were the Republicans as uninterested in art as is sometimes assumed? To answer that question we need to know more about the aesthetic tastes of individual

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¹ Patricia Mainardi, *The End of the Salon: Art and the State in the Early Third Republic* (Cambridge, 1993); Jane Mayo Roos, *Early Impressionism and the French State (1866-1874)* (Cambridge, 1996); Philip Nord, *Impressionists and Politics: Art and Democracy in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 2000); Miriam Levin, *Republican Art and Ideology in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1986).

² Levin, *Republican Art and Ideology*, xiii-xiv. The individuals she studies are Jules Ferry, Victor Hugo, Edouard Lockroy, Antonin Proust and Jules Simon.

Republicans. That requires moving beyond the official documents, policy statements and speeches that have often shaped the analysis of arts policy to other sources where personal views are more likely to be found.

This article explores the aesthetic tastes of Léon Gambetta, an influential Republican leader, through the lens of his personal correspondence; it considers the interconnections between his personal responses to art and republican arts policy in the 1870s and early 1880s. Miriam Levin excludes Gambetta from her study of *Republican Art and Ideology*, asserting that he “does not seem to have had any clear theory of art, nor to have been personally interested in the visual arts.”³ But his letters show that this assessment is incorrect. Gambetta had a broad range of contacts in the art world. He regularly visited the Salon and took every opportunity to explore museums and galleries and to cultivate links with curators.⁴ Gambetta’s private correspondence, especially with his lover, Léonie Léon, reveals both their shared enjoyment of art and Gambetta’s ventures into amateur art criticism.

Gambetta and Léonie Léon exchanged letters about art only when they were apart, and when one of them had the opportunity to visit an exhibition alone. Only a handful of letters therefore discuss art in detail. But those letters are generally lengthy, and their value for the historian far outweighs their number. They provide a glimpse into Gambetta’s passion for art. They also place his establishment of an independent Ministry for the Arts – in his short-lived government (November 1881–January 1882) – in a different, more personal context, suggesting new ways of seeing the inspiration behind it.⁵ The letters illustrate the emotional engagement with art that could (and, in Gambetta’s case, certainly did) underpin the Republicans’ ideological stance on the arts and the arts policies they implemented.

A Youthful Assessment: Gambetta on Jan van Eyck

The first comments about art in Gambetta’s surviving correspondence date from about 1865, when he was twenty-seven and had yet to embark on a political career. During a trip to Belgium and Holland, he visited some of the major repositories of Flemish art. His letter to an unknown woman discussing works by the fifteenth-century Flemish painter Hans Memling has disappeared.⁶ But the following day he wrote her

³ Levin, *Republican Art and Ideology*, 3; 225, note 5.

⁴ Gambetta had personal links with the Conservator of Antiquities at the Louvre (Bibliothèque de l’Assemblée Nationale [hereafter BAN], MS1777, Gambetta to Léonie Léon, Mar. 6, 1882, 82.20/73). His links with the Director of the Cluny Museum are suggested by the fact that he was able to make two copies of a ring held by the Cluny that had belonged to St. Louis: he and Léonie Léon exchanged these rings in 1874 (Paris, Archives Sciences-Po, Fonds Émile Pillias, 2EP 2, Dr1, sdr e).

⁵ J. P. T. Bury attributed the creation of the Ministry for the Arts to the ideal of an “Athenian Republic” in *Gambetta’s Final Years: The “Era of Difficulties” 1877-1882* (London, 1982), 293-94. The same link is made in Pierre Antonmattei, *Gambetta Héraut de la République* (Paris, 1999), 379, and Pierre Barral, *Léon Gambetta Tribun et Stratège de la République (1838-1882)* (Paris, 2008), 238. Only Bury discusses the idea in any detail (*Gambetta’s Final Years*, 17-18). Neither Daniel Amson, in *Gambetta ou le rêve brisé* (Paris, 1994), nor Jean-Marie Mayeur, in *Léon Gambetta: La Patrie et la République* (Paris, 2008) considers the question of Gambetta’s motives. Jérôme Grévy’s discussion of the “Athenian Republic” relates it solely to the Republican salons. Cf. *La République des Opportunistes 1870-1885* (Paris, 1998), 183-87.

⁶ “I was telling you yesterday that Memling was a sophisticated sensualist, a lover of the caresses and treasures of nature, but lacking in religious sentiment”: “Léon” to an unknown woman, undated (1865?), in Joseph Reinach, *La vie politique de Léon Gambetta suivie d’autres essais sur Gambetta* (Paris, 1918), 229-31. Reinach reports having found the letter amongst Gambetta’s papers after the latter’s death. He suggests the date 1865.

a lengthy critique of Jan van Eyck's "The Madonna with Canon van der Paele" (1436) that he saw in a Brussels Museum (fig. 1).

Gambetta described the painting at some length, trying to create an image for his correspondent: "The painting I saw portrays the Virgin playing with her son to whom she is offering a bouquet of those yellow and green flowers called Our Lady's wallflowers (*giroflées de Notre-Dame*)...; in adoration before the celestial group is a canon, an old man of 70 years, whom the worship of God and the tithe haven't ruined too much." Gambetta's lengthy description focused on the canon's head:

The painter's genius bursts forth with the canon's head; it is astonishingly alive and profound. The head is strong, thickset, with large cheeks that time has torn and scored. The ear is prodigious; you might say that it is alert for the music of an organ placed in the background; this ear is enormous, evidently drawn from life; the lobe of the ear is divided from the cheek by an incomparable gleam of light.⁷



Figure 1 Jan van Eyck, "The Madonna with Canon van der Paele," Stedelijke Musea Brugge, © Lukas-Art in Flanders VZW. Reproduced with permission.

Gambetta went on to describe the neck, the complexion, the temples (where "bundles of nerves and wrinkles blend together like lace"), the hair and the bald pate, the eyes, mouth, chin and nose. Only an art-lover would have taken the time and the care to examine the work so closely. At twenty-seven, he already demonstrated the keen eye of the amateur but perceptive critic.

But Gambetta's assessment went further, teasing out what he regarded as the underlying meaning of the image: "The painting is explained by this powerful head and Van Eyck only painted it to show off this extraordinary face whose meaning is very clear, disdain for the earthly life and familiarity with the other world; we might

⁷ "Léon" to an unknown woman, undated (1865?).

say that the next life has already begun for the Canon and that he will remain thus for all eternity.”

Gambetta saw a portrait of faith. The fact that he did not share this faith is evident in his slightly mocking tone (“an old man ... whom the worship of God and the tithe haven’t ruined too much; a pale pink complexion that suits old abbots so well, neither too red because that is indecent, nor too pale because that would not be accurate for a canon”). Furthermore, he extrapolated the beliefs of the artist from the painting:

Van Eyck ... is passionate about, mad about religion. He sees and feels nothing so elevated, so captivating, so enviable as love for Jesus or for his mother ... So our artist devotes all his passion to expressing religious love, ecstasy, prayer; the Virgin is above all the object of his devotion, which enables him to develop (*répandre*) in a thousand forms the heartfelt passion that drives him.

Gambetta’s approach to Van Eyck’s painting was later replicated in his responses to other works. He began with a detailed examination of the image, attempting to construct a narrative around it. He considered its “meaning,” and the “message” the artist sought to convey in the painting. Antonin Proust later insisted on Gambetta’s good judgment of art. Proust was a friend of Gambetta and became his Minister for the Arts, but he was also an eminent art critic, with numerous publications on art to his credit.⁸ In his view, “Gambetta had very sound tastes and a very sharp eye (*le coup d’oeil très juste*) ... judging the work in its entirety like an artist, not through a magnifying glass like an entomologist.”⁹ On the strength of his reading of Van Eyck, it might be more accurate to say that he did both. But Proust’s point remains valid: Gambetta looked not only for the artist’s skilful rendition of the subject, but for the painting’s overall meaning. Art told stories, conveyed ideas. What made for skilful representation, in his view, and what meanings were worth conveying?

The Critique of “Salon” Art

Gambetta wrote to Léonie Léon about the Salon of 1876:

I went to the Salon, where I was exhausted beyond measure by seeing the mediocrity of our fine arts. Painting is absolutely worthy of the epoch, lacking ideas, lacking distinctiveness (*relief*), lacking grandeur, an appalling level of practical skill invariably combined with a sterility of ideas. Sculpture is much

⁸ A Republican journalist, Antonin Proust represented the Département des Deux-Sèvres in the National Assembly and the Chamber of Deputies from 1876 to 1893. See the *Dictionnaire des parlementaires français de 1789 à 1889*, A. Robert and G. Cougny, eds., extracted at <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/sycomore/fiche.asp?num_dept=6516> Founder of the first decorative arts museum in France, Proust was influential in shaping arts policy and budgets both before and after his brief ministerial appointment. In addition to many political works and pieces of journalism, he published *L’Art sous la République* (1892), studies of Fantin-Latour and Manet, a number of reports on the annual Salon, and a catalogue of the Universal Exposition of 1889.

⁹ Quoted in Jules Clarétie, “Léon Gambetta: Amateur d’Art,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 27 (1883): 123-26 (125).

better, French genius in marble and bronze is still evident, that is where the aesthetic renaissance of this country will come from.¹⁰

Laments about the decline of the French fine arts were “in the air” at the time, and this was one issue Gambetta’s Ministry would later seek to address. But Gambetta’s comments also reflected his response to the styles of art favored at the Salon. Success at this highly prestigious art exhibition brought official recognition and commissions, so it had the power to shape aesthetic direction. But its influence was controversial.

Throughout the nineteenth century the role of the Salon, and who should control it, were hotly disputed. Under the Moral Order government (1873-77), the authority of the Academy of Fine Arts over the Salon was shored up. The Academy sought to restore “order” in the art world, just as the “Moral Order” government sought to do in the nation. It promoted the conservative norms of classicism, favoring large-scale works on grand themes drawn from history, religion and mythology. Daily life and ordinary people were not regarded as subjects for “great art,” and while the Salon accepted landscape, portraiture and still life – indeed, it was swamped by such works in the 1870s – these were regarded as minor genres.¹¹

Gambetta’s criticisms of the Salon of 1876 reflected dissatisfaction with the role of the Salon that many in his circle shared. If some Republicans, like William Waddington, approved the Academy’s desire to encourage “high art” over the “lower categories,” others, like Jules Ferry and Gambetta, emphasized the failures of the Salon to recognize great art (Ferry citing its rejection of Delacroix, Rousseau and Corot).¹²

Gambetta’s comments on the mediocrity of the Salon of 1876 also reflected his dream that the Third Republic would be an “Athenian Republic”: an idea sometimes underestimated in studies of his Republicanism.¹³ The arts and sciences would flourish, and the Republic would elevate and reward the intellectual and cultural elites responsible for French greatness. Gambetta clearly shared the views of Edmond Turquet, appointed Under-Secretary of State for Public Instruction and the Fine Arts in February 1879. Writing in Gambetta’s own newspaper, *La République Française*, he drew a comparison between the “Athenian Republic” and the “Philistine Republic.”¹⁴ Gambetta had spelled out that “Athenian” vision in 1872. Unlike all other republics, he had declared, the French Republic would be preeminent for its “pursuit of the arts, perfection in the crafts, superiority in the sciences”; the world would see in it “the flower of civilization and of taste,” “the highest expression of the human spirit.”¹⁵ The Salon of 1876 proved, for Gambetta, that that golden age still lay in the future. In 1878, he would again outline the goal of “making [France]

¹⁰ BAN, MS 1777: Gambetta to Léon, Apr. 30, 1876, 76.23/50. The Salon opened officially on 1 May (Mainardi, *End of the Salon*, 47), but Antonin Proust stated that Gambetta customarily attended a few days beforehand (Clarétie, “Léon Gambetta: Amateur d’Art,” 124). Cf. also Paris, BAN, MS 1777: Gambetta to Léon, June 10, 1876, 76.29/50: “Make your arrangements so that we can go to the Salon on Tuesday morning.”

¹¹ See Mainardi, *End of the Salon*, 9-55.

¹² Mainardi, *End of the Salon*, 43-44, 61-62.

¹³ On the “Athenian Republic,” see Bury, *Gambetta’s Final Years*, 17-18; Grévy, *La République des Opportunistes*, 183-87.

¹⁴ *La République Française*, Feb. 10, 1879.

¹⁵ Léon Gambetta, “Discours prononcé le 1^{er} octobre 1872 à La Roche et à Annecy,” in *Discours et plaidoyers politiques de Léon Gambetta*, Joseph Reinach, ed., 11 vols. (Paris, 1880-85), vol. 3, 150-70 (169-70).

the most educated, the most enlightened, the most cultivated, the most artistic country in the world” through Republican education.¹⁶

Only sculpture seemed to Gambetta to have escaped the mediocrity of an art that had lost its way. Despite disliking the Salon’s promotion of allegoric painting, he enjoyed sculpture that employed allegoric language to extol the virtues of the Republic.¹⁷ He owned a number of busts of the Republic by unnamed sculptors (one a gift from the citizens of Alsace and Lorraine), as well as a bronze by Bartholdi, sculptor of the Statue of Liberty and of many other republican monuments.¹⁸ François Rude’s monumental sculpture atop the Arc de Triomphe, officially titled “The Departure of the Volunteers of 1792,” also drew his “unreserved admiration,” its heroic military theme and its Romantic-Realist style creating an alluring combination.¹⁹

Classicism versus Naturalism

Gambetta preferred exactly those “minor genres” disdained by the Salon, particularly landscape painting and portraiture in a “naturalist” or “realist” style. These two terms had similar meanings at this time, referring to works based on direct observation and usually portraying contemporary subject matter rather than history or mythology.²⁰ Gambetta’s preference for such work is spelled out in two letters from 1874, when he made a trip to Holland and Belgium with friends.

They went first to The Hague, where Gambetta wanted to show them a painting entitled “The Bull” by Paulus Potter. The canvas shows a young bull, sheltering under a small tree with the farmer and several other animals. All are depicted very vividly and with great attention to detail. Flies hover over the bull, for instance, and a tiny frog hops past in the foreground near a large cowpat.²¹ Gambetta described this painting to his patron, Juliette Adam, as “the masterpiece” of the gallery and urged her to make the effort to see it herself.²² Uncharacteristically, he did not explain to Adam the meaning the painting held for him or what made it such an important work, but we can assume from his responses to other paintings that he was inspired by the “realist” depiction of the subject.

¹⁶ Léon Gambetta, “Discours prononcés les 17 et 18 septembre 1878 à Valence et à Romans,” in *Discours et plaidoyers politiques de Léon Gambetta*, vol. 8, 226-52 (246).

¹⁷ On the Republican use of classical allegory, see Michael Adcock, “Pictorial Politics and ‘Social Art’: Representations of the Working Classes in French Art, 1848-89,” (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2000), 319.

¹⁸ Gambetta’s few pieces of art are listed in the inventory taken after his death (Archives Départementales des Hauts-de-Seine, 2 Mi 41, “Scellés après le décès de M. Léon Gambetta, 1^{er} janvier 1883.” Cf. also Ministère de la Culture, *Hommage à Léon Gambetta*, Musée du Luxembourg, 18 nov. 1982 – 9 jan. 1983 [exhibition catalogue], nos. 387, 378).

¹⁹ Clarétie, “Léon Gambetta, Amateur d’Art,” 124.

²⁰ John Hourie describes naturalism as “a loose synonym for realism” in the nineteenth century, until Zola’s work gave naturalism more specifically “scientific” connotations. Realism was “loosely used (like naturalism) to describe works based on direct observation,” though it was more clearly associated with contemporary subject matter. See *The Oxford Companion to Western Art*, Hugh Brigstocke, ed. (Oxford, 2001), 510, 619.

²¹ Paulus Potter (1625-1754), “The Bull,” c. 1647. Cf. Royal Picture Gallery, The Hague. <<http://www.mauritshuis.nl/index/>>

²² Gambetta to Juliette Adam, Oct. 7, 1874, in *Lettres de Léon Gambetta 1868-1882*, Daniel Halévy and Émile Pillias, eds. (Paris, 1938), no. 217. See the discussion in Bury, *Gambetta and the Making*, 213-14.

A lengthy letter to his lover Léonie Léon during that same trip, describing an exhibition he saw in Brussels, spells out Gambetta's tastes more clearly. The gallery, run by the English collector John W. Wilson, specialized in landscapes by the English painters J. M. W. Turner and John Constable. Gambetta hailed Constable as "the inaugurator of the new naturalist school of painting." Constable had abandoned "all the conventions, the false contrivances, the depictions of supposedly Greek or Roman countryside," becoming, according to Gambetta, "the first to use his own eyes, to see, to feel for himself, to admire the grass, the water, the trees in their striking and natural beauty."²³

Gambetta also praised Constable's impact on French landscape painting. Without Constable's achievements, he observed, "the great school of French landscape painters would still be copying or padding out the collections of Eustache Lesueur, of Poussin, of Vernet the younger, of Girodet and of other lovers of Greek temples hidden in the midst of trees of zinc and cardboard."²⁴ This was an extremely broad-brush critique, since several of those Gambetta named were not primarily landscape artists, and Girodet was clearly inspired by Romanticism.²⁵ But Gambetta saw a common theme amongst these painters: their scenes were artificial and contrived, not based on the representation of "real life" that he preferred.

Gambetta admired the French artists on display in Brussels in 1874. Jules Dupré, Théodore Rousseau and Jean-François Millet may have found little favor in Salon circles, but Gambetta regarded them as "the three great representatives of the contemporary French school." They are generally known as members of the Barbizon School, after the village where they gathered to paint.²⁶ Gambetta marveled at the "vigor and boldness" of Dupré's landscapes. He was enthusiastic about Rousseau's portrayal of the "immortal forest of Fontainebleau," describing Rousseau as "a sort of pictorial Virgil" who evoked on canvas "the brilliance, the color, the poetry" that Virgil had achieved in verse.²⁷

His comments on this selection of artists suggest why Gambetta found "naturalism" so appealing. He welcomed art that represented objects as he thought they actually were; that tried to capture the features of the subject in ways recognizable to the viewer. Gambetta loved Rousseau's images of Fontainebleau because he "recognized" them from his own visits to that forest, where he loved to walk with Léonie Léon. In admiring Constable for representing objects with "all the strength of their tones, the imprecision of their shapes, the variations of shade," Gambetta presented "truth" as a goal for the painter: a good painting captured what was "really there." In the same vein, Proust later referred to Gambetta's "preference for the [painters] who, for more than eighty years, have [...] brought the French School back to respect for the Truth."²⁸ Simultaneously, however, Gambetta's description of painters "seeing for [themselves]" suggested the subjectivity inherent in

²³ Gambetta to Léon, between 2 and 5 Oct. 1874, in *Lettres de Léon Gambetta*, no. 214.

²⁴ Gambetta to Léon, Oct. 2-5, 1874, in *Lettres de Léon Gambetta*, no. 214.

²⁵ "Girodet, Anne-Louis," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Art*, Ian Chilvers, ed. (Oxford, 2004); [eNotes.com](http://www.enotes.com/oxford-art-encyclopedia/girodet-anne-louis). 2006, <<http://www.enotes.com/oxford-art-encyclopedia/girodet-anne-louis>> (accessed 27 June 2010).

²⁶ Anthony Langdon, "Barbizon School," *Oxford Companion to Western Art*, 47. Cf. Steven Adams, *The Barbizon School and the Origins of Impressionism* (London, 1994); Jean Bouret, *The Barbizon School and Nineteenth Century French Landscape Painting* (London, [1973]).

²⁷ Gambetta's description of Rousseau as the "pictorial Virgil" refers to Virgil's tribute to rural Italy, *The Georgics*. In Book II, Virgil describes the Vale of Tempe, a favorite haunt of the gods because of its great beauty.

²⁸ Clarétie, "Léon Gambetta: Amateur d'Art," 124.

such works.²⁹ His surviving letters do not discuss the tension between these two points of view.

The Painter as Citizen: Art as Social Commentary

Gambetta's tastes in art were consistent with his political philosophy, which, in the wake of the traumas of the Commune, rejected "class conflict" for an idealistic vision of potential social harmony.³⁰ He aspired to "bring closer together the bourgeois and the worker, the worker and the peasant," believing that this was only possible under the Republic.³¹ He extolled the virtues of "labor." France, he declared, was "a peasant nation, a laboring nation, a nation of small employers, and of small property-owners, a thrifty nation."³² This harmonious France, sharing the one national ideal, included all those who contributed to the common welfare: "the whole laboring world, bourgeoisie and proletariat, who form the base of French democracy."³³ Only the idle remnants of the aristocracy remained outside his Republican ideal. This ideal, in turn, had its origins in Gambetta's understanding of the Revolution of 1789. He saw the Republic as the fulfillment of its principles.

Gambetta admired paintings that depicted this world, particularly those that portrayed the dignity of ordinary people in their daily lives. His comments in 1874 on Jean-François Millet's renowned painting "The Angelus" provide a good example of the fit between his political ideas and his appreciation of art:

[This is] a masterly canvas where two peasants, bathed in the colors of the setting sun, bow down, filled with mystical sensations (*frissons*) at the sound of a bell that chimes the evening prayer at the monastery blurred on the horizon, which shimmers (*saphire*) and forces us to reflect on the still-powerful influence of religious tradition on rural populations. These two great silhouettes of the farmer and his maid-servant rise up on the still-warm earth with such a combination of meticulous detail and impressive scale (*largeur*)!³⁴

Surprisingly, he saw a "farmer and his maid-servant," not a peasant couple working the land in partnership. Perhaps he read in the painting not household relations but village relations, seeing there a microcosm of the social harmony he believed in and desired to encourage.

Gambetta's eloquent description of the painting reveals its impact on him. According to Antonin Proust, Gambetta remained proud of having "caused a fuss" (*ameuté*) before the painting when it was displayed at the Salon of 1866.³⁵ Perhaps

²⁹ See John Houre, "Realism," *Oxford Companion to Western Art*, 619.

³⁰ On this vision, see Barral, *Léon Gambetta: Tribun et stratège de la République*, 182-89.

³¹ Speech of 14 July 1872, quoted in Barral, *Léon Gambetta*, 183.

³² Léon Gambetta, "Discours prononcé le 24 mai 1878 au Banquet du Cercle National," in *Discours et plaidoyers politiques de Léon Gambetta*, vol. 8, 151-61 (159).

³³ Speech of 16 October 1871, quoted in Barral, *Léon Gambetta*, 183.

³⁴ Gambetta to Léon, Oct. 2-5, 1874, in *Lettres de Léon Gambetta*, no. 214. According to Halévy and Pillias, John W. Wilson purchased "The Angelus" for his Brussels gallery in 1874 (editors' note to letter 214). However, the provenance outlined by the Musée d'Orsay, where the painting is now held, contradicts that claim. According to its website, the painting was in the Van Praët collection in Brussels from 1860 but entered the Paul Tesse collection in 1864 and the Emile Gavet collection in Paris in 1865. Nor does the Musée d'Orsay list an exhibition in Brussels in 1874. There can be no doubt, however, that this was the painting Gambetta saw. Cf. <http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire_id/langelus-339.html>

³⁵ Jules Clarétie, "Léon Gambetta: Amateur d'art," 124.

his enthusiasm for the painting drew a crowd of onlookers; perhaps he argued with those less enamored of genre painting than he was.

“The Angelus” was a very sentimental rendering of peasant life: a rendering produced not from observation, but from Millet’s memories of his grandmother’s noonday prayer.³⁶ For Gambetta, the image evoked quiet perseverance, the eternal rhythms and unchanging routine of the countryside:

The bell has sounded the curfew on labor, and suddenly these two black brutes (*animaux*), as Labruyère would call them, rise to their feet and, motionless, count the strokes of the bell, as they did yesterday, as they will do tomorrow, in a pose too natural not to be customary, so that, the rite having been accomplished, they might then take the path that leads back to the village.

His comments suggest rural archaism and religiosity, reflecting his belief that “the peasants are intellectually several centuries behind the enlightened portion of the country.” But while putting that view, he also berated the society that had kept them “in a state of intellectual and social inferiority,” denying them the full inheritance of the French Revolution.³⁷ In quoting – ironically – Labruyère’s satirical description of the “savage brutes” who peopled the countryside,³⁸ Gambetta approved a work that undercut notions of a brutish peasantry through a sympathetic depiction of the quiet dignity of rural people.³⁹ This was consistent with Gambetta’s respect for those who (in his words) “feed, labor, struggle and are killed for France.”⁴⁰

In studying Millet’s painting, Gambetta reflected once again on the role of the artist:

The scene is admirable and its meaning reaches beyond the subject matter: one feels not only that the artist is a painter, but that, living fervently in the midst of the passions and problems of his time, he knows how to share them and transpose the portion that he has understood onto the canvas... [*sic*]

Understood like this, the painting ceases to be purely a spectacle, it rises to assume a moralizing, educative role; the citizen enters the artist and with a great and noble painting we have a lesson in social and political morality.

Here he made explicit his belief in the “moralizing, educative” role of art, and art’s ability – even its obligation – to convey truths to the viewing public. The artist had a responsibility to paint as a “citizen.” In taking this view, Gambetta echoed widely held Republican views that shaped their policies once they assumed control of government in the late 1870s.⁴¹

³⁶ See the analysis on the website of the Musée d’Orsay: <http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire_id/langelus-339.html>

³⁷ Léon Gambetta, “Discours prononcés le 19 février 1871 à l’Assemblée Nationale ... et le 26 juin 1871 ... à Bordeaux, in *Discours et plaidoyers politiques de Léon Gambetta*, vol. 2, 1-35 (21-22).

³⁸ Jean de la Bruyère (1645-96) left one enduring work, *Les Caractères* (1688), which was a satirical description of contemporary society. Remarking on the miserable state of the peasants, he described them as “savage brutes.” Cf. Peter France, “La Bruyère, Jean,” in *The New Oxford Companion to Literature in French*, Peter France, ed. (Oxford, 1995), 428.

³⁹ David Rogers, “Millet, Jean-François,” in *The Oxford Companion to Western Art*, 479.

⁴⁰ Léon Gambetta, “Discours sur les lois constitutionnelles prononcé le 23 avril 1875 à Paris (XIX^e arron.),” in *Discours et plaidoyers politiques de Léon Gambetta*, vol. 4, 299-340 (329).

⁴¹ See Levin, *Republican Art and Ideology*, esp. chs. 2 and 4.

Gambetta admired Millet's "Angelus" because he took it to be a portrait of rural life as it was actually lived, marked by hard labor and fatalism but also by beauty and serenity. This also characterized a work that Léonie Léon drew to Gambetta's attention at the Salon of 1879: "I believe I found a painter, named Renouf, about whom none of the Salon authorities (*salonates*) has spoken! He has an old fisherman repairing his boat which reminds me of the heads of D [Delacroix?] and which I greatly admired."⁴²

Emile Renouf's painting, officially titled "Last Refit, My Poor Friend," depicted a weathered old seaman lovingly sanding the hull of an equally weathered boat. It was one of a number of paintings on maritime themes submitted to the Salon that year, which the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* suggested formed a new genre: "seascape with figures."⁴³ The *Gazette* wrote positively of these genre paintings, if they were based on "direct observation and the study of the milieux in which we live and the people around us."⁴⁴ Unfortunately, Gambetta's reply to Léon's letter has not survived, but given their shared sentiments about art, it is likely that Gambetta admired it too.

"Last Refit" won no prizes at the Salon, but it was purchased by the State – securely in Republican hands in 1879 – for one thousand francs.⁴⁵ In purchasing art for the decoration of public buildings, the Republicans favored works in the "naturalist" style. They also sought sympathetic and unthreatening representations of working people, which could be used to foster social harmony and explain Republican social policies.⁴⁶ Like two other examples of "seascape with figures" reproduced and discussed by the *Gazette* in 1879 – a family group lunching on a river barge and a "fisherman's wife" and children rowing their vegetables to market – Renouf's smiling old man had nothing in common with the strikers and revolutionaries that threatened the vision of Republican harmony to which Gambetta was attached.

If Gambetta's Republicanism shaped his affection for portraits of dignified laborers, it may also explain his warm reaction to a portrait of a widow and child by Sir Joshua Reynolds, which he had hailed as the "pearl" of the Brussels exhibition in 1874. The unnamed work may have been the portrait of Lady Helen Dashwood and her son, painted in 1784 and reproduced as an engraving by Samuel William Reynolds in 1833.⁴⁷ Again, he described the image in detail:

A young widow, in the full bloom of her beauty, is playing with the baby seated on her knees. The young woman perceives in the traits of her beloved child the image of an adored husband, and as if the child already repeated the gestures of his dead father, he stretches out his fat little pink hand under the chin of his mother, who cannot, despite her mourning, refrain from smiling, like a flower blooming suddenly in the midst of a storm.

⁴² BAN, MS 1777bis, Léon to Gambetta, June 2, 1879, no. 329.

⁴³ Arthur Baignères, "Le Salon de 1879," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 2^e période, 19 (1879), 42. Cf. *Paris Salon de 1879*, no. 2530: Emile Renouf, "Dernier radoub, mon pauvre ami," in *Catalogues of the Paris Salon 1673-1881*, comp. H. W. Janson, 60 vols (unnumbered) (New York, 1977-78).

⁴⁴ Baignères, "Le Salon de 1879," 38.

⁴⁵ The painting is in the art gallery at Issodun (Indre). Cf.:

<<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/arcade/pres.htm>>

⁴⁶ Adcock, "Pictorial Politics and 'Social Art,'" 307-8, 319, 331.

⁴⁷ See the website of the National Portrait Gallery in London:

<<http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp64549/mary-helen-graham-lady-dashwood>>

Gambetta admired the image's representation of both "nature and humanity:" "What nature! The cool leafy shades of an immense English park; and what humanity! The grace of maternal love." "It is impossible to offer a more perceptive and more elevated image of intimate life," he added.⁴⁸

Again, Gambetta's analysis moved from the image itself to the deeper meanings he believed it conveyed. If he responded warmly to images of the dignity of labor, in this case he responded to a Rousseauian image of motherhood, an image which was also embedded in Republican ideology. He interpreted this work not simply as a portrait of a prominent woman by a society painter, but as a portrait of domestic intimacy and maternal love. As Gambetta noted to Léon, too, it reminded him of a story with which he was familiar from Homer's *Odyssey*: that of Hector farewelling his wife, Andromache, and his infant son, as he headed off "to die for the fatherland" in the Trojan Wars (a very nineteenth-century reading of that conflict).

Furthermore, Gambetta read the image as a representation of the cycle of life and death, contrasting the fleetingness of human life with "eternal nature." His uncovering of these layers of meaning revealed again the sophistication, however idiosyncratic, of his approach to painting and his assumption that paintings had deeper meanings to be excavated: no notion of "art for art's sake" seems to have crossed his mind.

If Gambetta's Republicanism attracted him to "realist" works, perhaps his same Republicanism made it impossible for him to admire – even to understand – Impressionism. His correspondence is silent on Impressionist painting, despite the fact that he had numerous contacts and friendships in Impressionist circles.⁴⁹ Nor is there any evidence that Gambetta and Léon visited the independent exhibitions organized periodically by the "new painters" in the 1870s as a response to their exclusion from the Salon.

Perhaps Gambetta was left behind by the Impressionists' stylistic innovations. His tastes were not avant-garde, any more than were those of the general public. As Anthony Langdon suggests, the "generally romantic" works of the Barbizon school "touched a popular mood" in the way that the "consciously modern" works of the Impressionists initially did not.⁵⁰ Gambetta was part of that mood. But his comments on art, and especially on the role of the artist, also suggest that he shared the views of Republicans who were critical of the Impressionists for representing only the transitory, or for emphasising the purely material qualities of their medium, ignoring the all-important ennobling ideal.⁵¹

Conclusion

Gambetta's letters reveal a man who responded as passionately to art as he did to every other aspect of life. His responses were those of a viewer from a modest provincial background, though one with a sound classical education in the local *lycée*; they were those of a member of the aspirational "new social strata" that he himself had identified, keen on self-improvement and eager to acquire the cultural capital of the elites. Gambetta responded with particular enthusiasm to painting that portrayed

⁴⁸ Gambetta to Léon, Oct. 2-5, 1874, in *Lettres de Léon Gambetta*, no. 214.

⁴⁹ Philip Nord, *The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 164-65, 169; Nord, *Impressionists and Politics*, 65-66; Anne Martin-Fugier, *Les Salons de la III^e République: Art, Littérature, Politique* (Paris, 2003), 181-82.

⁵⁰ Langdon, "Barbizon School," in *The Oxford Companion to Western Art*, 47.

⁵¹ Levin, *Republican Art and Ideology*, 20-21, 126, 161, 186; 231, note 47.

the world around him in recognizable ways, preferring contemporary subject matter and representations of daily life. He admired images of ordinary people, especially of the “laboring France” who comprised his ideal Republic. Such images captured the beauty of the nation’s landscapes and the virtues and strengths of its people, consistent with Gambetta’s vision of social harmony. He seems, however, to have envisaged a different role for sculpture, at least in its public forms. Allegory, in the Republican tradition stemming from the Revolution, met his desire for uplifting representations of abstract ideas to inspire “laboring France” as it built the Republic.

Gambetta’s correspondence shows how assessments of Republican views on the arts are enriched when we look beyond policy documents to personal sources. Many of Gambetta’s Republican colleagues shared his attachment to Realism. They also shared his belief in the edifying and educative role of art in society: art had the power, and the responsibility, to edify and enlighten. But Gambetta’s letters show that these views were intricately enmeshed with his personal appreciation of art. They stemmed from his aesthetic sensibility; they were not just pragmatic choices designed to put art to utilitarian ends. Gambetta’s passion for art suggests that his establishment of a dedicated Ministry for the Arts in 1881 was not simply inspired by the perceived economic benefits of the move, which he highlighted in his proposal to President Grévy.⁵² Rather, his elevation of the arts reflected the deeply held sentiments of an art-lover for whom the arts were a vital part of personal and community life. Gambetta’s passion for the arts thus invites us to reconsider the links between art appreciation and arts policy. That, in turn, suggests a need to look differently, and in different places, for the evidence.

⁵² Léon Gambetta, “Création d’un Ministère des Arts,” Nov. 14, 1881, in *Discours et plaidoyers politiques de M. Gambetta*, vol. 10, 264-67.