
Review by Michael Marrinan, Stanford University.

Thirty-five years ago, at a time that now feels like the heyday of public and scholarly interest in nineteenth-century art, Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner published a provocative little book that deplored certain efforts to rethink the march of modernism. “Art historians,” they wrote, “have taken a leaf from [Sir Lewis] Namier’s book and similarly tried to get rid of ideology, to study the day-to-day workings of the Salon, the transactions between artists and patrons, artists and dealers, artists and government bureaus. Most of this research, like Namier’s, is of extraordinary value, but we hope that it will not require as much labor to return artistic ideals and ideologies to their rightful place in history.” For Rosen and Zerner, getting lost in the minutiae of art market wheeling and dealing only obscured the larger and lasting issues of aesthetic value and historical coherence. Nonetheless, they hold that “the study of...neglected works is a promising new enterprise. It may end up smashing once and for all the mold of art history.” They recognize that “the traditional relegation of caricature, journalistic art, photography, book illustration, and commercial art to minor and subsidiary roles has little justification after 1800, whatever defense can be made for it in earlier periods.”[1] A generation later most of these issues remain open questions: it is surprising that Rosen and Zerner’s meditation on revisiting forgotten reputations is nowhere mentioned in *Horace Vernet and the Thresholds of Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture*.

Horace Vernet is a prime candidate for historical rethinking. Fabulously famous and patronized during his lifetime, and equally reviled by critics like Charles Baudelaire dear to the history of modernism, Vernet’s reputation has long been deprecated in the history of nineteenth-century art.[2] The editors of this new volume dramatize their ambitions by citing in the very first sentence of their introduction Baudelaire’s 1846 roast of Vernet’s work: “a sort of agile and frequent masturbation, an irritation on the French epidermis” (p. 1). The editors position their book as a gesture of recuperation that “places [Vernet’s] works back at the center of some of the larger artistic and cultural debates of the nineteenth century,” adding the claim that “Vernet’s value to the study of art’s histories lies in part in his status as a threshold figure through which the very idea of ‘modern art’ could be parsed and defined” (p. 2). They then raise the stakes: “Perhaps more than any other nineteenth-century artist, Vernet brought together modern categories otherwise believed to be incompatible, challenging distinctions between
‘high’ and ‘low,’ avant-garde and academic, public and private, emergent and established media...With Vernet we can sense the possibilities of new technologies, new patterns of media consumption, and new ways of imagining the self” (p. 5). What has certainly changed between 1984 and 2019 is the paradigm of artistic ambition: we now embrace the hyper-active, protean production of visual imagery for which a painter like Horace Vernet was roundly criticized in his own day, as Katie Hornstein sketches in her essay on facilité. Today, we reward a Jeff Koons, a Damien Hirst, or a Julian Schnabel with fame and fortune: in this context, it probably makes sense to give Horace Vernet some time on the stage of history.

How to proceed? That was the question broached by Rosen and Zerner, and it recurs in this collection which springs from a 2013 session of the same title at the Association of Art Historians in Reading, UK. In line with the ambitions just outlined, the editors group the essays into three sections: “Making Vernet” focuses upon the artist’s attention to his public persona, the cultivation of his reputation, and his complicity with rulers of very different politics; “Vernet and Genre” collects essays that dwell upon Vernet’s refusal to be pigeonholed as a history painter and explores his forays into the lesser modes of genre painting and portraiture as intentional moves to undermine institutionalized aesthetic categories; the essays of “Vernet and New Media” explore the effects of his remarkable productivity which flooded the market with paintings and prints and intersected with both popular theater and the rage for photography. An interesting text by Andrea Meyer—somewhat of a sidecar to this last section—considers Vernet through the eyes of Franz Kugler, a German writer and art administrator who, unlike most French critics, viewed Vernet’s history paintings favorably for opening new avenues of narrating modern history by adopting “strategies from the popular entertainment industry” (p. 254).

Like any collection of papers focused on a single topic but written independently, there is a certain amount of repetition. Several authors have something to say about the exhibition mounted by Vernet in 1822 after three of his major paintings were refused by the Salon jury—most likely for political reasons—because the restored Bourbon government was not keen to have events of the Napoleonic era on public display. Naturally, there is some disagreement about how to read that exhibition. A much-cited and -admired article of 1986 by Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, also an author in this volume, made the case that Vernet’s liberal politics informed his move to an independent exhibition. By contrast, Marie-Claude Chaudonneret’s essay follows the line developed in her several books and articles to argue that Vernet was less motivated by politics than avid to exploit “this rejection for his own publicity and maybe also to pose as a victim” (p. 29). On her account, Vernet is keen to extend the artistic legacy left by his grandfather (Joseph Vernet) and his father (Carle Vernet), to advance his career by skillfully networking and manipulating public opinion via the press, and to present himself as fully conversant in every conceivable genre and medium. “The event demonstrated,” she writes, “that artists could organize their careers and that they needed to be free to promote their work outside of official channels. This publicity had become possible thanks to the rising power of the press” (p. 31). That may be, but it seems to me that Vernet’s posturing and networking were things he neither invented nor discovered. If we are content to say simply that Vernet was “of his times” Chaudonneret’s argument makes sense, but it hardly positions him at the threshold of anything.

Daniel Harkett revisits the 1822 exhibition with the aim of harmonizing the conflicting accounts, although he admits “in the absence of an explanation from Vernet himself...it is likely
an impossible task to decide” among them (p. 38). Consequently, he opts for both-and: “...it is quite possible to imagine that Vernet was simultaneously making a political gesture and promoting his artistic credentials” (p. 38). For Harkett, today’s scholarly disagreement “mirrors” the range of opinions expressed in the Parisian press of 1822 which, in turn, allows us to appreciate Vernet’s cultivation of “fluidity” that encouraged contemporaries “to find in him what they sought” (p. 39). He cites letters between government and museum officials to demonstrate—correctly, I think—that they feared a public disturbance more than the outlawed tricolors in Vernet’s pictures (p. 41). Harkett suggests that Vernet opened his studio, situated somewhat at the edge of Paris in the Nouvelles Athènes quarter, as a kind of refuge—neither fully public nor completely private—where liberal admirers might imagine “a utopian national space, one free of restrictions imposed by the monarchy, one where an idea of nation forged in the fires of the revolutionary era could be remembered and celebrated” (p. 50). Yet, as he points out, this neat retreat was complicated by the intervention and circulation of texts—both the published exhibition catalogue and reviews in daily newspapers—which ensured that Vernet inhabited the centers of Parisian social life, notably public reading rooms, to become, in the words of Baudelaire, “the complete representative of his age” (p. 50).

Whether this makes Vernet “at ease with modernity” (p. 50) remains an open question, although Rachel Esner’s essay does segue nicely from Harkett’s by drawing our attention to the construction of Vernet’s public persona via the infamous picture of his studio that figured importantly in the 1822 exhibition. Her point is that the self-image cultivated in that canvas—Vernet simultaneously fences, smokes, and paints while surrounded by friends, animals, and personalities of the art world and politics—projects a double-edged popularity: a figure who both stands apart from the crowd and is simultaneously adored by it. Esner reminds us that Vernet’s immense popularity is precisely why Baudelaire destested him, and precisely why other critics less read by modern historians dubbed him “painter of the era” (p. 67). Here Esner touches upon without exploring more deeply a salient point about the fate of Vernet’s reputation: why have those voices who championed Vernet been read out of our historical accounts?

The issue returns in Kallmyer’s essay, which attends to a convergence between critical discussion of Vernet’s pictures and popular theater productions known as vaudevilles (pp. 208-209). Baudelaire had already exploited this link in 1846 to belittle Vernet by comparing him to Eugène Scribe.[5] Kallmyer extends the analogy by underscoring complaints that Vernet offers only an accumulation of accurately reproduced trivia lacking in depth and organized into anecdotes pandering to middle-brow taste (pp. 209, 215-216). The first of these—accurate reproduction of trivia—encourages Kallmyer to consider commentaries connecting Vernet’s glassy rendering of stuff to the impartial precision of daguerreotypes, thus implicating him in a second arena of popular imagery. While “high-art” critics—notably Baudelaire, Théophile Silvestre, and Charles Blanc—decried the machine-like accuracy of Vernet’s vision, others more inclined to embrace photography championed the parallel. Prominent among this group was Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, who wrote a long and admiring obituary about Vernet in January 1863.[6] Kallmyer is the only author of this volume to carefully read Sainte-Beuve’s text: she correctly concludes that “the theme of vision as the objective vehicle of nature’s truth dominates Sainte-Beuve’s essay from start to finish” (p. 218). Sainte-Beuve makes virtues of Vernet’s lack of “style” and speed of execution.[7] Yet Kallmyer blunts the thrust of this admiration by introducing Baudelaire’s Painter of Modern Life[8] as a “covert response to Sainte-Beuve’s unqualified eulogy of Vernet” (pp. 218-219). In her view, Baudelaire secretly
contrasts Sainte-Beuve’s Vernet to his own champion of modern life—the almost unrecognized Constantin Guys—as antidote to the “unpoetic veracity of photography and Vernet’s paintings” (p. 219). This rhetorical move at the close of Kallmyer’s essay—her sacrifice of Sainte-Beuve to the prestige of Baudelaire—strikes me as emblematic of why this volume ultimately fails to achieve the historical opening advertised by the introduction: at the end of the day, modern historians are unwilling or unable to invoke certain voices from the archive when doing so threatens their established narratives of modernity.

The editors are deeply invested in the idea that the wide range of Vernet’s oeuvre betrays an ambition to undermine the authority of the academy: if Vernet refused to accept the most prestigious mantle of history painter he implicitly proves that individuals are masters of their own fate. “Exploring how Vernet crossed thresholds in this manner offers us opportunities to see how the world was being remade in the nineteenth century” (p. 5), they write, implying that Vernet’s trajectory offers a way to see modernity in the making. On that score, it is not apparent to me that Vernet is more or less of a touchstone than any of his contemporaries—unless one accepts the argument that more paintings mean more impact. The hierarchy of genres was under pressure from the very beginning of the century—witness Napoléon’s adamant support of modern (military) subjects and the intrigues swirling around the Prix Decennaux of 1810.[9] To my mind, the middle section of the collection devoted to examples of Vernet challenging the categories of picture types is the least convincing. Does Susan Siegfried really mean that Vernet “created what might be called the romantic portrait image, in which clothes take charge of the body, shaping it…and giving full rein to historical whimsy that ranged well beyond the classical” (p. 111)? She offers fine readings of three case studies, but I think her claim is overstated. Siegfried, a leading scholar of Ingres, dismisses Gustave Planche’s remark that Vernet “wanted to struggle with M. Ingres” when painting his daughter (p. 128). Yet there is little about cloaking of the sitter’s body in Vernet’s picture that could not be said, for example, about Ingres’s wonderful portraits of the Rivière women (mother and daughter) painted in 1806 or that of Granet he painted at Rome in 1809.[10]

Thanks to cited letters, we can agree with Allan Doyle’s assessment that Vernet’s picture of Raphael at the Vatican of 1832 “challenges academic orthodoxy by advocating the elevation of genre to the status of history painting” (p. 137), but the work bombed so thoroughly at the Salon one is hard-pressed to invest it with anything like innovation. Doyle concludes that Vernet’s canvas “was designed to undo strict divisions between modes of production and open a regimented pedagogic system to the deregulatory pressures of popular taste” (p. 147), which seems an overly baroque apologia for a picture of dubious merit. Similarly, Simon Lee’s tortured explication of two (destroyed) canvases depicting widows—one deranged, the other a harp-playing Druid—as “subtle displays of support for Bonapartism” in 1824 is not convincing (p. 160). He then suggests that Vernet’s 1827 picture of Edith Recovering Harold’s Body after the Battle of Hastings is an overture to Charles X and the Bourbon Restoration (pp. 162-165): this is plausible, especially if we recall the intransigence of that government toward Delacroix’s Sardanapalus at the same Salon.[11] We easily admire Delacroix’s independence for refusing to engage the criticisms of Sosthène de la Rochefoucauld; must we deprecate Vernet’s appointment to director of the Academy of France in Rome as product of “a strategy of determined self-interest, combining astute anticipation of public taste with the cultivation of influential patrons across the political divide” (p. 165)? This back-handed compliment admits Vernet was an operative but avoids committing to whether his work offers anything to admire. Is this the dilemma of modernity to which Vernet points?
It would be remiss not to mention Vernet’s large pictures of the French conquest of Algeria upon which rested much of his popularity. They are discussed by three of the essays. Nicolas Schaub chronicles Vernet’s direct contact with Algeria in the course of six trips, usually to experience first-hand the sites of battles he was commissioned to render in paint. Schaub is sensitive to the very mixed feelings nourished by Vernet about Algeria: committed to colonization by military force in some letters (p. 76); shocked by the beauty of the people and land in others (p. 78); critical of the destruction left by the French armies to the point of no longer understanding the situation (p. 82). Schaub’s Vernet is caught in a double bind whereby he knows his task is to “generate a visuality that needed to produce a political effect on spectators,” but the feelings—even disgust—of his first-hand experience gnaw at his spirit. Importantly, Schaub suggests that Vernet’s solution, in his picture of the attack upon Constantine, was to engage a hybrid imagery that diverges from reportage to combine fantasy with domination (p. 82).

Although Schaub presents but does not pursue this insight, there are revealing links to the essay by Andrea Meyer already noted in passing. The hero of Meyer’s essay is Franz Kugler, who was deeply impressed by the installation of Vernet’s pictures at Versailles precisely for the ways they affected viewers (p. 252). In March 1848 Kugler expressed his enthusiasm before the Wissenschaftliche Verein zu Berlin, including his belief that Vernet “has achieved for history painting...all the majesty inherent in this genre” (p. 247). Why did a German critic see possibilities in Vernet’s paintings that Baudelaire—among others—did not? Meyer suggests that Kugler’s interest and fascination with mass media—panoramas, dioramas, and daguerreotypes—directed his attention to the compelling immersive effects of Vernet’s seemingly center-less compositions and endless accumulations of vivid detail. Kugler was thrilled by the spectacle of Vernet’s imagery at Versailles (pp. 253-255).[12]

The question of spectacle subtends Julia Thoma’s essay on Vernet’s retrospective at the 1855 Exposition Universelle, where only he and Ingres were allotted separate galleries in which to display a full range of their works. Delacroix was obliged to share a gallery but his exhibition was, in the words of Patricia Mainardi, “so well installed that although he was not given a separate gallery...he pronounced himself content.”[13] Thoma interprets Vernet’s decision to highlight his pictures of French victories in Algeria—including the very large canvases Capture of the Smalah of Abd-el-Kader and The Battle of Isly—in order to assert “his status as the most important battle painter of his day” (p. 94) and “to advertise a particular ‘brand of Frenchness’ promoted by the Second Empire, which emphasized military glory and the country’s historical roots in the First Empire” (p. 97). Thoma is surely correct to suggest that Vernet “was consciously fashioning himself as a loyal subject under the regime of Napoléon’s nephew” with an eye on future commissions (p. 96). At the same time, the proximity of Vernet’s retrospective to those of Ingres and Delacroix threw into sharp relief Vernet’s position—neither classicist nor romantic—within French painting. Thoma signals that critics in 1855 did not much use the term juste-milieu (roughly, middle-of-the-road) popularized in art-historical writing by Léon Rosenthal’s survey of 1914.[14] She concurs with Patricia Mainardi that most contemporaries lumped Vernet under the umbrella of “eclecticism” (p. 98).[15] However, she signals that Vernet stands apart from most of his contemporaries in 1855 because of his “remarkably varied public,” his “accessible” narratives, and an attraction that “resided primarily in its value as entertainment” for a “rising mass consumer culture” (p. 98). She writes that “Vernet’s room arguably catered to the sensationalism of this culture” (p. 98) and that his large Algerian
pictures “created a thrilling effect” by making the viewer feel “as though she or he were stepping into the canvas to join the figures” (p. 99). This was an effect both phenomenological and political, for “even war seemed pleasurable, and the Algerians, who were in fact threatening French dominance in 1855, were defeated” (p. 100).

Thoma suggests that Vernet’s retrospective “was perceived less as a site for quiet art contemplation than as an entertainment booth” (p. 99). I believe she is onto something when she writes that “only the art critics despairs over Vernet’s deathblow to history painting: for the bourgeoisie (and for many commentators) this a was a happy space that met their need... for entertainment and spectacle” (p. 100). Vernet’s art crossed a threshold, but not so much the lofty examples sketched by the introduction to this volume. The paradox of art critics— and art historians—writing about Vernet is the difficulty of admitting that he crosses the line between museums and the world of entertainment, a blurring very evident in today’s culture industry. It’s an uneasiness that reappears in Kallmyer’s comparison between Vernet and Scribe, and elicited by the caricature of a bourgeois gentleman who tries to convince his partner that “il n’y a aucun danger à courir devant les batailles de M. Horace Vernet; viens voir ça” (p. 99). To my mind, the issue of “visual culture” implied by the volume’s title must speak to affinities between Vernet’s work and the entertainment value of high culture, which is why the reactions of Franz Kugler described by Andrea Meyer’s essay are both interesting and timely.

Théophile Silvestre ended his survey of Horace Vernet’s career in 1857 with a savage assessment: “M. Horace Vernet, c’est le daguerréotype incarné, la vivante usine d’images populaires, telles qu’il les faut à la cohue des dimanches dont les yeux voraces, inassouvis par les funambules et les foires de barrières, viennent se délecter encore à la Smala d’Abd-el-Kader et à la Prise de Rome. M. Horace Vernet a reçu pleinement, et il recevra quelque temps encore les faveurs du vulgaire. Il en est digne. Mais l’Avenir lui sera dur. Malheur aux artistes qui n’auront travaillé que pour amuser la plèbe contemporaine! De leur vivant ils reçoivent toute leur récompense. Le succès leur arrive immense, éclatant, sans mesure. Qu’ils demeurent ensevelis dans cette popularité banale, comme dans la fosse commune!”[16] Several of Silvestre’s themes are explored by the essays in this volume, but one finds only a hesitant admission that the public’s “voracious eyes” were driving desire for new sensations. Vernet’s pictures take their place in a history of nineteenth-century visual culture that intersects only diagonally with that of easel painting: the viewing thrill once integral to standing before a Vernet battle picture migrated forever from canvas to screen with the astonishment and fear generated by Louis Lumière’s film of a train pulling into La Ciotat station. Even if our received accounts of that filmic seance are exaggerated, Vernet’s reputation could not survive moving imagery able to grip viewers with a ferocity that his most dazzling canvases could not match.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Daniel Harkett and Katie Hornstein, “Introduction”


Daniel Harkett, “Revisiting Horace Vernet’s Studio Exhibition”

Rachel Esner, “Horace Vernet in the Public Imagination”
Nicolas Schaub, “Horace Vernet and the Conquest of Algeria through Images”

Julia Thoma, “Writing History: Horace Vernet’s Oeuvre under the Second Empire”

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Simon Lee, “Deranged and Virtuous Widowhood: Horace Vernet’s Woman Driven Insane by Love and Edith Recovering Harold’s Body after the Battle of Hastings”

Melanie Vandenbrouck, “Illustrious Heritage: Vernet Painting Vernet”

Katie Hornstein, “Horace Vernet and the Problem of Facilité”


Stephen Bann, “Horace Vernet and Paul Delaroche: Media Old and New”

Andrea Meyer, “A View from Germany: Vernet, New Media, and the Remaking of History Painting”

NOTES


[7] “L’art est une convention, l’art de la peinture particulièrement. Horace Vernet aimait que ce fût une convention le moins possible, que le convenu ne s’y aperçût qu’au moindre degré. Il puisait son principe en lui, dans son organisation même. Doué de sens exquis, d’une mémoire visuelle merveilleuse, d’organes et d’instruments d’imitation fins, rapides et sûrs, plus prompt à faire qu’à dire, il eut de l’art toute la première vue qu’on peut désirer; mais s’il y a dans l’art
autre chose que l’immédiat, s’il y a une seconde vue plus idéale, celle-là il ne l’eut point” (Sainte-Beuve, ibid., p. 165).


[12] In her discussion of Vernet’s 1822 picture of his grandfather tied to the mast of a ship during a storm, Melanie Vandenbrouck points out that Adolphe Thiers found the unconventional composition “perfectly placed to stage a spectacle” but required looking through emotional distractions for the hero (p. 176). Vandenbrouck supposes that Thiers misunderstood Vernet’s intentions; my point is that the effects of spectacle are bundled with viewer responses not normally expected in gallery spaces.


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