

H-France Review Vol. 20 (January 2020), No. 19

Peter Cooke and Nina Lübbren, eds, *Painting and Narrative in France, from Poussin to Gauguin*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016. xv +233 pp. Notes, figures, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780367200275.

Review by Andrei Pop, University of Chicago.

“See Spot run.” This notorious sentence from the *Dick and Jane* primers used to teach reading in postwar North America is familiar to generations of English speakers who have not had to endure the books. So is the association between the rudimentary narrative and a visual image of the running subject, a dog. That is no accident: just as we are storytelling animals, the portability of narrative from language to various embodied forms (from the classic fine arts to film and the video game) is irrepressible, despite modernist strictures against mixing art and literature.[1]

The volume under review, ably edited and introduced by two scholars of late-nineteenth-century French painting, aims to bring the study of *narrative as such* to the center of art history. Its way of doing this might seem strange, unless one is a historian of modern French art. That history was once a history of the *avant-garde* and its struggles with an unsympathetic bourgeois public and a conservative academic establishment. But postmodernism struck early in French art history: a slew of revisionist books and exhibitions of the 1970s and 1980s, culminating in the opening of the Musée d’Orsay as a synchronic display of nineteenth-century French art, *avant-garde* and academic, restored the reputations of painters skilled in manipulation of audience expectations and narrative conventions, like Paul Delacroix, whose 1833 *Execution of Lady Jane Grey* is now again unapologetically one of the most beloved paintings in London’s National Gallery.[2] And so the titular bookends of this volume do not fully characterize the contents: Poussin and Gauguin *are* chronological limits to this narrative arc, but David, Delacroix, and Moreau, who each have an essay or more dedicated to them, are as close to the canon as this book gets. In particular, the apparently *anti-narrative* narrative techniques of Ingres, Courbet, or Manet do not figure, to say nothing of the vivid storytelling of a Daumier. That French art alone is treated need not worry us in the pages of *H-France*, but how to explain the absence of caricature, popular imagery, and photography, which so forcefully embodied the supposed simultaneity of visual narrative, made legible by the newspaper headline?

The short answer, which has been central to the revisionist art history mentioned above, is that European art since the Renaissance put a premium on the depiction of history or storytelling (that fateful homonym *historia*), a procedure codified by Poussin’s epigones in the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, aided by Cartesian psychology and the expressive heuristics of stage practice. A one-sided diet of ancient history and mythology, supplemented by military

history, served as ambitious subject matter for French painting until the years of the Revolution, when the shallow-staged, tense stand-offs of classical bodies in Jacques-Louis David's pictures pushed classical standards of balance and clarity to their breaking point. In the nineteenth century, historicist, poetic, sentimental, and everyday concerns invaded history painting, much as they did the writing of Chateaubriand, Victor Hugo, and George Sand. The French art that most fascinated the later Victorian public remained picturesque history painting, now of a conspicuously exotic nature, dressing up its Greeks and Romans as Arabs or Neolithic nomads. *Avant-gardes* aimed for a different kind of success, but could not deny the skill of Salon favorites like Ernest Meissonier, whom Van Gogh defended against his own symbolist boosters.[3] It was only with the disappearance of the human body in twentieth-century abstraction that narrative allegedly abandoned painting to its dreary 'formal values.'

So much for the standard (revisionist) art history. It conveniently dodges the fact that modernist artworks like Duchamp's *Bride* are as narratively intricate as James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Even a formalist bugbear like Clement Greenberg could admire Paul Klee for "putting the gist of his art into narrative and decorative complications." [4] But the well-worn story is good enough to motivate a narrative reconsideration of French history painting, which is more or less bankrupt by the time of Gauguin. His efforts to paint the Passion narrative, for instance, met with skepticism from the same Van Gogh who appreciated Meissonier.

The editors arrange the essays in strict chronological order, giving the volume more coherence than one expects in revised symposium proceedings. In the first essay, Claudine Mitchell delivers a commentary on Poussin's *Manna* and Charles Lebrun's defense of its temporal integrity, which had drawn criticism from Academicians concerned with Biblical accuracy. Inspired by Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, Mitchell argues that Lebrun and Poussin see the miracle divided into "three logical phases" (p. 29), devoted to expounding the general idea of a miracle and its historical embodiment in the fall of the manna, rather than trying to stuff several moments into one painting, which the picture looks to be doing. The second essay, by Marianne Cojannot-Le Blanc, tackles the more nebulous legacy of Lebrun's decorative painting at Versailles. Following Louis Marin, we learn that the intricate rhythm of historical allegories and Latin inscriptions is like "the opening of a novel" which then shades into epic, the uniting factor being "the profoundly fictional dimension of the pictorial narration" (p. 46). One wonders what Louis XIV would have made of this take on his Romanism (*Veni vidi vici* is one of the gilded inscriptions). Certainly fiction for him was something all-consuming, like creation. The third essay, by Susanna Caviglia, announces a surprisingly early "crisis of narration" in the oft-neglected early eighteenth century (p. 55). The lush but static canvases of Natoire, Boucher, and Vanloo, with their soft pyramids of bodies, establish what Academic theorists called "actions of repose" (*actions de repos*) or even "non-actions": a noteworthy precursor to twentieth-century negations like the nonsite and the anti-aesthetic. Mark Ledbury closes the section on the *ancien régime* with an appealing gallery of the "obscure, capricious and bizarre" (p. 64), in other words with wildly histrionic tendencies in history painting, from Fragonard's career-making melodrama *Coresus and Callirhoe* (a pagan priest sacrificing himself rather than his beloved), through the cheery sequel of Athenian girls drawing lots to see who would be sacrificed to the minotaur, a work that Fragonard abandoned but which we can imagine through a small canvas by Pierre Peyron, to more familiar juxtapositions of Greuze and David. There is overlap with Ledbury's 2004 article on extreme subject matter in David's drawings, linked to the vogue for Shakespeare and his French partisans.[5] Here the discussion is broader, in art and literature: it

turns out that David did not just read Plutarch but also “pot-boiler[s] or scandal-sheet[s]” like *The Lives and Amours of the Empresses* (p. 73).

The French Revolution boldly skipped, we find ourselves in the book’s second quarter with Beth Wright’s text on “Delacroix and ‘The Work of the Reader.’” After the careful introduction to Delacroix as a reader, especially of Walter Scott, it is disappointing to find brief sections, however adroit, on familiar paintings like *The Massacre at Chios* and the Byronic *Marino Faliero*, though the two Scott-inspired case studies show, more than anything in the book, that narrative analysis of painting profits from looking at literature as well. Richard Wrigley’s characteristically subtle essay on what is perhaps (now) the obscurest painting in the book, Léopold Robert’s *Arrival of the Harvesters in the Pontine Marshes*, builds on his mastery of the cosmopolitan Roman art world, here connected to the *genre historique* or *pittoresque* that constitutes the French counterpart to the Biedermeier of Central Europe. Patricia Smyth continues this exploration with an essay on the canonical artist of the genre, Paul Delaroche, indeed of his most famous painting, the *Assassination of the Duc de Guise*. The stage-like box with its dead body jarringly relegated to a corner has attracted much recent work, from Stephen Bann to Beth Wright; given this relatively crowded field, Smyth works hard to locate unarticulated discomfort in Delaroche’s naturalistic rendering of bodies and light in a “traditional framework of attitudes in which visual experience is denigrated as insignificant” (p. 120). This is hard to square with the supposed Western primacy of vision, unless the tradition in question is history painting itself.

The final historical section of the book is introduced by editor Nina Lübbren’s study of “eloquent objects” that perform “inanimate narration” in Delaroche’s heirs Meissonier, Jean-Léon Gérôme, and Paul Laurens (p. 129). Gérôme’s *Death of Caesar* was once dismissed as “Laundry Day” at the Roman Senate for its chaotic togas,^[6] and Lübbren excels in showing how, as Max Liebermann preferred a well-painted asparagus to a well-painted Madonna, so the academic artists with their smooth, glassy verisimilitude endowed objects with as much agency as people. Or as little. The firmly anti-narrative tendency dominates in Scott Allan’s essay on Gustave Moreau, which makes many of the same points that editor Peter Cooke has made in his articles and monograph on Moreau, though Allan is less intent on social history and more on comparing paintings with the artist’s pronouncements. As in Caviglia, an ideal of repose and subjective interiority emerges as a check on action in paintings that remain mythological or literary. Pierre Sérié, too, brings in Moreau, with many academic painters, before settling on the overlaid, historicist canvases of Georges Rochegrosse, ostensibly in light of Michael Fried’s theatrical/absorptive distinction, though by the end we are hearing more about Meyerbeer. In this essay especially some non-French art, such as Hans Makart’s, might have cast light on Rochegrosse’s operatic efforts.^[7] Belinda Thomson, in a thoughtful rereading of some familiar Gauguin tropes, finds his narrative “conflicted” by incomprehensible Tahitian titles (p. 176), a refusal of allegory, or the aspiration to the condition of music, the latter a cliché by the late 1890s. It is worth nothing that Gauguin, like Manet, Redon, or Rops (all of whom illustrated or portrayed Stéphane Mallarmé), found a paradigm in poetry, with its suggestive rather than explicit narratives and foregrounding of mood.

The final theoretical section is a bit brusque given the measured dialogue that comes before. Peter Cooke’s essay, devoted to the temporality of narrative, largely extends the introduction’s arguments against G.E. Lessing and the “pregnant moment” of visual narrative, arguing indeed that the “point in time is a fallacy with no basis in human experience” (p. 193), a claim that would puzzle Henri Cartier-Bresson, he of the famous snapshot of a man jumping over a puddle. Cooke

is better when not in the grip of a theory: a comparison of Poussin with Léon Cogniet, once famous for a morbid painting of Tintoretto painting his dead daughter, demonstrates how an isolated incident can relate to the whole (the Massacre of the Innocents in this case) classically and conceptually in Poussin or more loosely and dramatically in Cogniet. This has a connection with the “allegorisation” of narrative which Cooke notes in Poussin, Delacroix, and Moreau (pp. 194-195): unfortunately, we are not told what allegory is, though the examples make it clear that it has to do with subordination of the object to a concept. Etienne Jollet’s closing essay, ranging over the whole early modern period, rehearses in approachable form his arguments for a broadly Aristotelian narrative art criticism, taking delight in the many French precursors to Lessing.

It is hard to treat a volume that manages a confluence of voices (five of them translated from the French by the editors, no mean feat), as a unitary theoretical statement. But the programmatic introduction and placement of the theoretical essays at the end suggest that one *should* leave the volume with definite ideas about narrative. One of these that might startle readers is that Lessing’s distinction between time-based arts and space-based arts, which must choose one significant moment to narrate, is worthless, or that it can be turned on its head by Gérard Genette’s playful suggestion that a text, in being printed in book form and thus available all at once, becomes spatial. Genette’s more serious point is that it is reading (which after all cannot take in a whole book at once) that makes texts temporal. Fair enough. But given Jollet’s and Mitchell’s demonstrations that the “significant moment” doctrine was widely shared in the seventeenth century, this seems a missed opportunity. The father figure Lessing requires not slaying but putting in context: for instance, why did the premier playwright and theatre critic of the German Enlightenment not consider theatre, which is both spatial and temporal? In part, because he was fascinated by the expressive affordances of poetry and painting: the way perception is effortless in visual art while action is inferred, while the poet can vividly describe action but is hopeless when it comes to showing the reader a face or a landscape. The best poetry can do in such cases, according to Lessing, is to describe viewers’ reactions to physical facts. Now, history painting is full of images of people reacting to beauty or horror exactly as Lessing suggested they do in Homer. But, Lessing would counter, those staring people with raised hands are stiff and unconvincing in painting, where we ourselves are also spectators. He may not be always right, but remains endlessly suggestive to art historians interested in narrative.

The same skepticism may greet the complaint that, Franz Wickhoff and Mieke Bal aside, art historians have ignored narrative. Classic texts on the very period in question, from Walter Friedlaender and Robert Rosenblum (not his 1967 monograph *Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres*, but his wide-ranging 1969 study of *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art*) to the more recent, and wildly divergent, work of Thomas Crow, Michael Fried, Darcy Grigsby, and T.J. Clark, worry the narrative possibilities of French painting to almost microscopic levels of detail. True, they do not propose a formal vocabulary à la Propp or Wickhoff. But neither do the authors in this volume. There are surely logical, semantic, and narratological conclusions to be drawn about art. But art historians, even philosophers like Richard Wollheim, have brought them out mainly by close looking, by noting the way painted eyes meet each other and ours, or vanishing points coordinate space in and out of the painting. As long as art is made for storytelling creatures, it is by telling good stories about it that we will understand it best, and this fine book contributes to that humanistic practice. [8]

LIST OF ESSAYS

Peter Cooke and Nina Lübbren, “Introduction: Narrativity and (French) Painting” Claudine Mitchell

Claudine Mitchell, “Units of Vision and Narrative Structures: Upon Reading Poussin’s *Manna*”

Marianne Cojannot-Le Blanc, “Figures of Narration in the Context of a Painted Cycle: The North Bays of the Grande Galerie at Versailles”

Susanna Caviglia, “The Crisis of Narration in Eighteenth-century French History Painting”

Mark Ledbury, “Obscure, Capricious and Bizarre: Neoclassical Painting and the Choice of Subject”

Beth S. Wright, “Delacroix and ‘The Work of the Reader’”

Richard Wrigley, “Narrative and History in Léopold Robert’s *Arrival of the Harvesters in the Pontine Marshes*”

Patricia Smyth, “Narrative Strategies in Paul Delaroche’s *Assassination of the Duc de Guise*”

Nina Lübbren, “Eloquent Objects: Gérôme, Laurens and the Art of Inanimate Narration”

Scott C. Allan, “Tyrannical Inopportunity: Gustave Moreau’s Anti-narrative Strategies”

Pierre Sérié, “Theatricality Versus Anti-Theatricality: Narrative Techniques in French History Painting (1850–1900)”

Belinda Thomson, “The Conflicted Status of Narrative in the Art of Paul Gauguin”

Peter Cooke, “Narrativity, Temporality and Allegorisation, from Poussin to Moreau”

Étienne Jollet, “Towards a Study of Narration in Painting: The Early Modern Period”

NOTES

[1] For the “storytelling animal” thesis, see, e.g., Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

[2] The first wave of this art history and curating was lucidly reviewed in Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York: Viking, 1984). Perhaps the most outspoken of the revisionists was Albert Boime in *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Phaidon, 1971).

[3] Letter to G.-Albert Aurier, printed in Aurier, *Œuvres posthumes* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1893), p. 208, the first of Van Gogh’s famous letters to be published.

[4] Clement Greenberg, "An Essay on Paul Klee," [1950] in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, 4 vols. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986-1993), v.3, 9.

[5] Mark Ledbury, "Visions of Tragedy: Jean-François Ducis and Jacques-Louis David" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 37, no.4 (2004): 553-80.

[6] Gerald Ackerman, *The Life and Work of Jean-Léon Gérôme, with a Catalogue Raisonné* (London and New York: Sotheby's Publications, 1986), 53.

[7] Lübbren does mention German, Italian, and British paintings, but none are illustrated.

[8] This is not to say that new approaches, like tracking the eye movements of spectators, might not contribute to an understanding of pictorial narrative. The point is rather that it will tell us little if it is not connected at all to *what* people are looking at in those paintings.

Andrei Pop
University of Chicago
apop@uchicago.edu

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172