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Christian Michel, *The Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture: The Birth of the French School, 1648-1793*. Translated by Chris Miller. Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2018. xvi + 414 pp. \$75.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-60606-535-8.

Review by Robert Wellington, Australian National University.

On a recent visit to Montréal, I was invited to lead a graduate seminar based on my experiences as an Anglophone scholar working on French history and French-language material. That seminar led me to think about how to address—in a formal professional context—a topic of informal chatter (and playful teasing) that often comes up when I talk about the field with my French colleagues and others like me who work with French as a second language. How do you describe the difference between art history practiced in the French academy and that of the international Anglo-American field (in which I include the Canadian and Australian schools)? The English translation of Christian Michel's masterful study, *The Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture: The Birth of the French School, 1648-1793*, proves to be an excellent example of how the discipline differs between those contexts. These differences might be characterised, and are often caricatured, as the distinction between an empirical, archival, and positivist approach (French) and a more speculative, theoretical, and ideas-based approach (Anglo-American). Christian Michel's magisterial study is a tour-de-force of French academic erudition of a kind that can only be born from a deep and sustained engagement with primary research materials.

This revised, updated, and expanded English translation of a book first published in France in 2012 claims to be “the single most authoritative account of the Académie and its legacy,” and this does prove to be the case. The Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, which “governed the arts in France for almost a hundred and fifty years” (p. xi), was founded in 1648 by a group of artists who wanted to demonstrate that the fine arts (primarily painting and sculpture but also print-making) were a liberal (intellectual) practice, rather than a mechanical trade. Proving that would free artists from the guild system and afford them certain privileges, such as the right to take the title of painter, sculptor, or engraver “to the king.” In granting this request, the Crown legitimised the nascent academy. Among the petitioning artists was Charles Le Brun, the man who would go on to be *premier peintre* to Louis XIV, and who has received the posthumous reputation of a “dictator” of the arts through his various roles including chancellor and later director of the Académie, a position he held up until his death in 1690. [1] The Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture was one of three academies formed during the reign of Louis XIV that later merged to form Académie des beaux-arts in 1816 after the restoration of the Bourbon Monarchy under Louis XVIII.

The structure of the original Académie, and the preeminent position of history painting as the pinnacle of academic art, became the model against which modernist artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries defined their avant-garde practice. Academic art—with its dependence on classical texts and biblical stories, or mawkish moral tales—has a reputation of being dry, stuffy, theatrical, and pompous. Famously, the moderns called academic artists *pompier*s, mocking the classical figures in academic paintings and sculptures with a word play that simultaneously recalled the helmets of nineteenth-century French firefighters (which looked a bit like those of their Roman legionaries), the *pompéiste* style inspired by the famous ancient Roman town, and the *pompeux* tone of their high-minded works.

Christian Michel's study shows that criticism of, and resistance to, the Académie royale was not just a modern phenomenon—advanced art against the old guard—but began from the first days of its establishment. He writes that “the theory of art in France developed in, around, and against the Académie Royale. Yet few institutions have suffered such consistently virulent criticism, and even fewer have endured—and continue to endure today—such a poor reputation. That criticism is, moreover, not simply a product of historical perspective; it accompanied the Académie's entire existence” (p. xi).

The hierarchy of membership and institutional theories of artistic practice created many enemies amongst those who did not benefit from that system. But how much did the rules and regulations of the Académie really influence the making of art in France? The original aim of this study was to show, as the author states, the “effects of the Académie on artistic production,” that is to say, “the relations between theory and practice” (p. xii). But this task proved to be impossible for him without first providing a revised institutional history based on rigorous research into contemporary historical accounts of the Académie, its founders, protectors, members, and those who opposed it. This is the reason for the two-part structure of the book: part one provides the institutional history and part two gives a more thematic account of the ways in which the Académie, its program for training, and the process for admission as a member affected artistic practice over the course of 150 years.

The institutional history provided in the first part of the book is comprised of five chapters and tracks the academy from establishment during the regency of Louis XIV's mother, Anne of Austria, to its abolition during the French Revolution. Michel focusses particularly on the organisational structure of the institution under the guidance of its protectors (a responsibility of the *surintendant des bâtiments du roi*, or superintendent of the king's works). Readers familiar with the art of ancien régime France will find themselves drawn into stories of rifts and rivalries between familiar and sometimes more obscure protagonists. One of the strengths of this study is that it doesn't simply provide an overview of the institution in broad strokes; it is full of anecdotes that bring a great sense of humanity along with its historical precision. No doubt every specialist will find something of interest—a new archival gem, perhaps—that relates directly to their research. I, for one, was fascinated to learn more about the role of numismatics in the Académie with medals presented as awards to students and silver *jetons de présence* (tokens of presence) that members received as a modest remuneration for attendance at official meetings.

The second part of the study approaches the relationship between the Académie and the role it played in shaping artistic practice in France, and indeed in Europe more broadly. It begins with an introduction that provides a detailed review of anti-Académie literature from its foundation to the late twentieth century. This is followed by four chapters addressing various ways that the

institution affected the work and lives of its members and those outside of its ranks through academic training, the Académie's definition of art, the professional/commercial practice of academic artists, and the influence of the Académie beyond France. Those chapters provide a nuanced, critical investigation of the discrepancies between academic theory and the reality of the professional life of its members. We learn that while history painting represented the apex of artistic practice in theory, this did not necessarily translate into commercial success for the history painter. After the reign of Louis XIV, when many members of the Académie were working for the Crown on the *grands décors* of the Sun King's palaces, there was little demand for history paintings on the commercial market. While history painters remained (at least theoretically) higher in the Académie's ranks, by the eighteenth century the popularity of artists breaking new ground outside the formal categories of academic art, such as Jean-Antoine Watteau, eclipsed that of those working on more traditional history paintings. There was also room in the market for artists whom the Académie rejected, like the Swiss painter Jean-Étienne Liotard, a favourite of the most famous patron of the mid-eighteenth-century France, the Marquise de Pompadour. Liotard was forced to join the less prestigious Académie de Saint-Luc, because the Académie royale "considered his work mediocre" (p. 236). Michel shows us that the Académie did not have the final word in all matters of taste, and it is in those nuances that his study is at its best.

Despite the sound reasons provided by the author for the two-part structure of the book, it is not wholly successful. There is quite a lot of repetition between the two sections which, granted, is necessary for providing clarity for the reader, but which makes for dull reading at times. The depth of archival work that makes this book such a terrifically useful resource becomes a little burdensome too, with page upon page of lengthy citations from the primary literature. Here we really see an aspect of French academic writing that does not translate well into the English language context; the author's voice is sometimes lost behind capacious quotations where the exact point of evidence for which they have been employed is nestled.

The final conclusions offered in this volume are illuminating, however. Michel argues that the variety found in the works of art produced by the Académie's members demonstrates that "there was no academic doctrine" (p. 339). The diversity of artistic practice is evidence, he claims, to a fairly tenuous connection between any prescribed academic rules or definitions of art and the actual output of the Académie's members. One of the more fascinating themes to emerge throughout the study, the concept of emulation in academic art, is addressed again in the conclusion but remains a little obscure and unresolved. We learn that copying from ancient and modern masters was part of academic training, that acolytes of senior academicians were more likely to win coveted prizes that advanced their careers, and that emulating certain themes and formats of painting and sculptures by peers or mentors could be an expression of professional rivalry to demonstrate one's unique skill, rather than evidence of unoriginality, as it might appear. Indeed, emulation, repetition, uniformity—all of those things for which academic art suffered a bad reputation in the wake of modernist notions of the autonomous, original, creative genius—were more complicated than they first appeared. There was a far more subtle game of rivalry, dissent, and creativity at play than we might have thought.

The final line of the volume, "any serious [art historical] study must acknowledge the fundamental role played by the *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*," (p. 347) is ultimately an anti-climactic parting message to such expansive archival research. It strikes me that echoes of that institution for the professionalisation and intellectualisation of fine art are found today in

our modern art schools. Working, as I do, at the School of Art and Design at the Australian National University—an art academy of the twenty-first century—Michel’s study leads me to reflect on the comparisons we might find between academic artists then and now. Just as membership in the Académie royale afforded certain privileges that allowed artists to pursue their practice, such as the provision of accommodation (the *logements* at the Louvre), the security of a regular income for artists employed at a university today might offer a path to explore creative practice without following the vicissitudes (or sheer good fortune) of the art market. But more than that I cannot help but find shades of the Académie’s project to raise art-making to the level of a serious intellectual pursuit in the language of professional art found used in universities now. In a time when the act of painting a canvas is “practice-led research” and the result of that activity is a “non-traditional research output,” I have no doubt that my colleagues would find Michel’s investigation of the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture to be very pertinent.

NOTE

[1] Le Brun’s reputation as a “dictator of the arts” has recently been redressed in the work of Wolf Burchard and Florian Knothe: Wolf Burchard, *The Sovereign Artist: Charles Lebrun and the Image of Louis XIV* (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2016) and Florian Knothe, *The Manufacture des meubles de la couronne aux Gobelins under Louis XIV: A Social, Political and Cultural History* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2016).

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