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Cyril Lécosse, *Jean-Baptiste Isabey: Petits portraits et grands desseins*. Paris: CTHS/Institut national d'histoire de l'art, with the Université de Lausanne, 2018. 328 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. €38.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7355-0855-6.

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The cover image of Cyril Lécosse's groundbreaking study of Jean-Baptiste Isabey – celebrity miniaturist and draftsman of the Revolution, pageant master of the Empire, and consummate artistic survivor – is an 1840 portrait drawing of the general Antoine Drouot, who (like the artist) rose from the *petite bourgeoisie* in Nancy to the summits of the Napoleonic elite, went into exile on Elba with the emperor, and fought at his side at Waterloo. Drouot, who lost his sight late in life, is pictured in military uniform, his eyes covered with a black blindfold.

Isabey's striking portrait of Drouot encapsulates both the artist's technical innovations and his enduring loyalty to the Napoleonic regime. The medium itself is evidence of Isabey's successful adaptation to, and exploitation of, the upheaval of the art world after 1789; as Lécosse argues, Isabey popularized and commercialized the genre of the finished drawing, eventually extending that success into the new medium of lithography. The portrait of the blindfolded Drouot, with its allusions to disability and disempowerment, also poignantly evokes the fate of the emperor's partisans – both the general and the artist – during the Restoration.

Lécosse's study of Isabey's career and output provides us both with a granular, meticulously documented understanding of the artist's professional trajectory and with a larger narrative about the post-Revolution art world, the legitimization and political efficacy of heretofore "minor" genres and media, the rise of consumer culture, the social and political networks of the new elites, and the rise of liberalism. Because Isabey was actively producing work from the 1780s to the 1840s, Lécosse is able to offer readers the first sustained monograph on Isabey since the early twentieth century, and also use his career as a lens through which to examine a still understudied period of art production.

The ambitions of Lécosse's book make it a bridge between Anglo-American and French scholarship on French art. Robert Wellington, in a recent publication in *H-France Review*, sketched out the stereotypes of the two schools of art history: French art history is empirical, archival, and positivist, driven by an artist-centered vision of aesthetic production, and Anglo-American art history is interpretive, theoretical, and historicist.[1] Wellington rightly notes that these stereotypes are more or less grounded in reality, and most Anglo-American scholars working on French art can testify to the difficulties of overcoming this real or perceived divide.

Lécosse's book is part of a recent wave of French scholarship on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art that brings the two schools of scholarship together: Anne Lafont's brilliant *L'art et la race: l'Africain (tout) contre l'oeil des Lumières* (2019) immediately comes to mind.[2] As suggested by the forceful preface to Lécosse's book by Philippe Bordes – himself a pioneer of a Revolutionary art history with one foot in each world – this approach is both novel and in need of defense in the French academic context.

Lécosse's subtitle, *Petits portraits et grands desseins*, is emblematic of his ambitions. His treatment of the cover image juxtaposed with that title, the 1840 portrait of the blindfolded general, reveals both the strengths of his study and the ways in which Lécosse could have pushed his argument further. Lécosse positions the portrait as evidence of the artist's longevity and of his lifelong embeddedness in elite political and social networks. But the portrait also suggests other avenues of analysis. What does the dramatic occlusion of the general's eyes say about vision and the endurance of Revolutionary and Imperial ideals? What parallels might the artist, sitter, or viewers draw between the military survivor and the 73-year-old veteran of the Parisian art world? While Lécosse's book successfully situates Isabey's work in a broader historical and political narrative, it prioritizes the documentation and contextualization of the artist's career and the description of artworks over interpretation. As a reader from the Anglo-American side of the divide, this seems to me like a missed opportunity to deepen his analysis and to speak to the specifically aesthetic claims made by Isabey.

Lécosse's monograph joins a small but growing scholarly literature committed to re-reading the history of art during the French Revolution, the Empire, and the Restoration. His study acknowledges and builds on Bordes's formidable body of work on Jacques-Louis David (Isabey's teacher) and on the art of the Revolution. Lécosse also draws upon Tony Halliday's *Facing the Public: Portraiture in the Aftermath of the French Revolution* (2000), and my own work in *Portraiture and Politics in Revolutionary France* (2014).[3] His focus on Isabey turns a spotlight on an artist who has seen little critical attention outside of a 2005 exhibition catalogue, joining a wave of scholars inside and outside France who have transformed our understanding of neglected late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century artists, from David's students (Jean-Antoine Gros, Anne-Louis Girodet, François Gérard) and less-known history painters (Charles Meynier) to portraitists (Marguerite Gérard, Jean-Baptiste Augustin, Louis-Léopold Boilly) who were Isabey's friends, colleagues, and rivals.[4] Lécosse's own monograph, while it does not engage Romanticism explicitly, nonetheless takes its place among new and nuanced revisionist studies of Romanticism in the visual arts, including recent publications from the Musée de la Vie Romantique, the Petit Palais's magisterial exhibition and catalogue *Paris Romantique, 1815-1848*, and English-language studies by Katie Hornstein, Thomas Crow, David O'Brien, and others.[5]

Lécosse's six-chapter book is organized chronologically, spanning Isabey's very long life, from his birth in 1767 to his death in 1855. This structure, while a nod to the traditional artist's monograph, is largely governed by political history, and dwells longest on the Revolutionary period; the chapter covering 1791-1799 is almost double the length of the other chapters.

In his introduction, Lécosse clearly positions his object of study as not just Isabey's career but also a series of related problems: the status of miniature painting in gouache or watercolor in a system that privileged history painting, the significance of portraiture post-1789, the changing formulation of artistic identity, and the exercise of state patronage by a succession of political regimes. Lécosse aims to reframe the documentation of Isabey's career and the cataloguing of his

work which constituted his dissertation; he wants to “inscrire ces données dans une nouvelle temporalité, celle de l'historien et de ses questionnements” (p. 24). This amounts to a declaration of a new kind of French-language monographic study that connects the artist's biographical and aesthetic trajectory to a larger cultural and political history.

Chapter one, “Le temps de la formation (1767-1791),” combines a more traditional mode of scholarship—a detailed history of Isabey's familial milieu and artistic training with Jacques-Louis David and other painters—with a broader analysis of the Parisian art world in the late Ancien Régime. Lécosse, drawing on French and Anglo-American cultural histories of consumer culture and the art market, describes Isabey's entry into a thriving late eighteenth-century portrait market. Commercial considerations, Lécosse argues, persuaded Isabey to move away from his training as a history painter in the studio of David to a career as a miniaturist—a much more lucrative market after 1789.

Chapter two, “Les transformations du petit portrait sous la Révolution (1791-1799),” is the heart of Lécosse's book. It is here that he lays out his arguments (supported by a wealth of primary-source evidence) about the thriving market for miniatures and Isabey's canny manipulation of that market, and stakes his claim that Isabey was the most important artist of the period. This de-centering of oil painting, of history painting, and of David and his better-known students, building on my and Halliday's work, upends an older scholarly tradition. The chapter also chronicles Isabey's development of an innovative and equally lucrative medium, the large-scale finished drawing. Isabey's composition *Isabey and His Family (La Barque)* (1797, Louvre), an elaborate self-portrait with his young family, was a sensation at the public Salon exhibition. Lécosse argues that Isabey's drawing not only took advantage of the newly invented Conté crayon to evoke the style of fashionable English mezzotints, but also celebrated the self-realization of the individual artist as a liberal professional. Lécosse connects Isabey's artistic strategy, and his attunement to fashion and commerce, to the birth of liberalism and the triumph of the autonomous individual. This new “libéralisme débridé” (p. 144), Lécosse argues, went hand in hand with a collapse of artistic hierarchies; his analysis of Louis-Léopold Boilly's *Reunion of Artists in Isabey's Studio* (1798, Louvre), a group portrait of fashionable artists gathered in front of *La Barque* in Isabey's elegantly decorated studio at the Louvre, makes a convincing case for both Isabey's centrality to the art world and the triumph of so-called minor genres and media. But, as Lécosse concludes, this apparent egalitarianism and meritocracy in an art world newly governed by the free market masked social inequality; few artists could, like Isabey, exploit their social connections to the Revolutionary elites in order to harness the power of the market and of public opinion. This, Lécosse argues, is the paradoxical result of the liberty of 1791.

Chapter three, “Portrait et propaganda du Consulat au lendemain du sacre (1799-1805),” focuses on Isabey's contributions to Napoleon's complex propaganda offensive in support of his seizure of power and his eventual self-coronation. Lécosse also documents Isabey's close personal relationships with Napoleon's inner circle. The central case study is Isabey's large-scale drawing *La Revue des Tuileries* (1800, Buckingham Palace)—executed in collaboration with Carle Vernet—of Napoleon reviewing troops in the Tuileries, but Lécosse also discusses several other Isabey drawings executed for the First Consul. Lécosse argues that Isabey's work for Napoleon shows how adept both men were at cloaking authoritarian impulses in Republican ideals. Lécosse also addresses, in lesser detail, Isabey's role in the design of the costumes for the 1804 coronation—a role that merits more analysis, from the point of view of the history of dress and of the history of

gender. How, we might ask, did a male artist navigate the domain of fashion, which had largely been coded female in the late eighteenth century?

Chapter four, “L’artiste de cour sous l’Empire (1804-1814),” analyzes Isabey’s activity as an official court artist, especially the mass production of miniature portraits on boxes used for diplomatic gifts. The emphasis here (as throughout the book) is less on the formal qualities of the portraits than on the ways in which Isabey organized his studio and interacted with the administrative hierarchy. Lécosse uncovers valuable evidence about Isabey’s and other artists’ resistance to government price controls, and uses it as a springboard for his argument about liberalism and artistic identity. The imperial government, he argues, did its best to “annule[r] la notion libérale qu’est la liberté des prix fortement implantée dans les moeurs depuis la Révolution” (p. 201). Artists, Lécosse maintains, had difficulty adapting their Revolutionary liberalism to the hierarchy of the Empire.

Chapter five, “Entre Napoléon et Louis XVIII,” traces Isabey’s career during the First Restoration, the Hundred Days, and the Second Restoration. Lécosse describes him both as a committed Bonapartist and as a member of a recently wealthy elite who, despite his political convictions, was willing to embrace the first Restoration’s liberal respect for freedom and property. After Napoleon’s definitive defeat, however, Isabey maintained a pro-Bonapartist politics while working every possible angle—from court appointments to experiments with the new technology of lithography to commercial exhibitions in London—to support his career and his pocketbook.

Chapter six, “La fin de l’hégémonie du peintre,” follows Isabey into the July Monarchy, through the Revolution of 1848, and into the first years of Louis Napoleon’s reign. Ever the survivor, Isabey adopts the troubadour style of the Romantic generation and designs Charles X’s coronation in a high neo-Gothic idiom, but faces increasing competition from younger miniaturists. Lécosse argues that, despite Isabey’s lifelong success as a miniaturist and draftsman (not to mention costume and set designer) in the art market and with a dizzying succession of rulers, he ultimately failed to secure the recognition from the art world he craved. Despite relentless campaigning, he was never admitted to the Institut, and Lécosse points to a choir of critical opposition to miniatures and drawings around 1840 as evidence that old Academic attitudes died hard.

In his conclusion, Lécosse argues that Isabey, and miniaturists in general, never succeeded in conquering traditional prejudices against their medium. But that is only the least of Lécosse’s claims; this ambitious study moves beyond standard narratives about the primacy of history painting to make provocative arguments about the imbrication of art and politics, the impact of market forces on aesthetic choices, and the connections between artistic identity and the birth of liberalism.

*Jean-Baptiste Isabey: Petits portraits et grands desseins* is a successful study on many levels. Specialist readers will be grateful for the detailed documentation of the art market and government patronage. A broader readership will appreciate the ways in which Lécosse situates one artist’s career in the context of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political and social networks, and his ambitious argument about liberalism.

For all that Lécosse's study bridges the divide between French and Anglo-American scholarship, however, it may leave English-speaking art historians wishing that the author had committed more thoroughly to the dark side. His discussions of Isabey's work, as the case of the blindfolded Napoleonic general suggests, often remain at the level of formal description. More interpretation would deepen Lécosse's argument about Isabey's artistic strategies and networks, and would also allow him to insert Isabey into a larger art historical narrative. Isabey's forays into lithography and his continued production of miniature portraits into the era of the daguerreotype are suggestive of a line of argument about technology and modernity. Certain of Isabey's works—including a watercolor of *Le Grand Escalier du musée* (1817, Louvre), in which uniformed French officers and their female companions encounter a Turkish man against the backdrop of the recently-established French national museum—call out for a more polemical reading. And sometimes the readings Lécosse does provide are less than illuminating. The author's account of Isabey's portrait tropes for female sitters—an admittedly wearisome formula involving veils, flowers, and invisible sources of wind—merely rehearses the sexist arguments of nineteenth-century critics and scholars. Rather than seeking the iconographic origins of these tropes or reading them against contemporary fashions, ideals of femininity, or Isabey's studio production practices, Lécosse blames them on female vanity and “cette concession faite par Isabey à l'amour-propre de ses modèles” (p. 136); considering Isabey's flattering portrait of Germaine de Staël, for instance, Lécosse describes the distinguished author as having a “physique robuste et disgracieux,” which Isabey transformed into a portrait “pleine de grâce et de féminité” (p. 134). No such blame is cast on, or *ad hominem* attacks leveled at, Isabey's heavily idealized male sitters. And in any case, it takes two to tango—the common denominator in Isabey's vaporous portraits is Isabey.

Finally, Lécosse's desire to place his art historical research in dialogue with the questions of historians runs up against some obstacles. His discussion of Isabey's depiction of the fashionable Directory elites known as the Merveilleuses and Incroyables, for instance, misleadingly represents these men and woman as uniformly royalist. A deeper engagement with the historical literature would have produced a more complex, and more accurate, analysis of this Revolutionary cultural moment. Moreover, Lécosse's important argument about artistic identity and liberalism depends largely on Pierre Rosanvallon's *Le Sacre du citoyen: histoire du suffrage universel en France* (1992), and would be enriched by engagement with other scholarship on the birth of liberalism. [6]

Overall, however, Lécosse's book moves convincingly from the *petits portraits* to the *grands desseins* of his title. His study is an ambitious and largely successful transformation of the traditional French monograph into a study concerned with the sociology of the art world and the cultural and political history of the Revolution, Empire, and Restoration. His discussion of Isabey's career trajectory and artistic output is a welcome addition to the art historical literature on portraiture, on miniatures, and on French artistic culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

## NOTES

[1] Robert Wellington, “Christian Michel, *The Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture: The Birth of the French School, 1648-1793*,” *H-France Review* 20 (2020), No. 61. <https://h-france.net/vol20reviews/vol20no61wellington.pdf>

[2] Anne Lafont, *L'Art et la race: l'Africain (tout) contre l'oeil des Lumières* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2019).

[3] Tony Halliday. *Facing the Public: Portraiture in the Aftermath of the French Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Amy Freund, *Portraiture and Politics in Revolutionary France* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014).

[4] Among the many monographs published in the last 25 years, see for example: Carole Blumenfeld and José de Los Llanos, *Marguerite Gérard: Artiste en 1789, dans l'atelier de Fragonard* (Paris: Paris-Musées, 2009); Carole Blumenfeld, *Marguerite Gérard 1761-1837* (Montreuil: Gourcuff Gradenigo, 2019); *Jean-Baptiste Isabey (1767-1855): Portraitiste de l'Europe* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2005); *Joseph Boze, 1745-1826: Portraitiste de l'Ancien Régime à la Restauration* (Paris: Somogy, 2004); Anne Lafont, *Girodet* (Paris: Biro, 2005); Isabelle Meyer-Michalon, *Charles Meynier, 1763-1832* (Paris: Arthéna, 2008); David O'Brien, *After the Revolution: Antoine-Jean Gros, Painting and Propaganda Under Napoleon* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006); Bernd Pappé, *Jean-Baptiste Jacques Augustin, Peintre en miniature* (Saint-Dié-des-Vosges: Musée Pierre-Noël, 2010); Xavier Salmon, *Peintre des rois, roi des peintres: François Gérard portraitiste* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2014); Susan L. Siegfried, *The Art of Louis-Léopold Boilly: Modern Life in Napoleonic France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995); Susan Siegfried, *Ingres: Painting Reimagined* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[5] Sébastien Allard and Marie-Claude Chaudonneret, *Le suicide de Gros: les peintres de l'Empire et la génération romantique* (Paris: Gourcuff Gradenigo, 2010); Jean-Marie Bruson and Florent Allemand, eds., *Paris Romantique, 1815-1848* (Paris: Paris Musées, 2019); Thomas E. Crow, *Restoration: The Fall of Napoleon in the Course of European Art 1812-1820* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018); Daniel Harkett and Katie Hornstein, eds., *Horace Vernet and the Thresholds of Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2017); Katie Hornstein, *Picturing War in France, 1792-1856* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017); David O'Brien, *Exiled in Modernity Delacroix, Civilization, and Barbarism* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018).

[6] See, for instance, Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt, *French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Andrew J.S. Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics After the Terror: The Republican Origins of French Liberalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

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