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Richard Thomson, *The Presence of the Past in French Art, 1870–1905: Modernity and Continuity*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021. 288 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$70.00 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 9-78-0300257106.

Review by Marnin Young, Yeshiva University.

Once upon a time, political leaders evoked a “classical” style “to visually connect [the] contemporary Republic with the antecedents of democracy in classical antiquity, reminding citizens not only of their rights but also their responsibilities in maintaining and perpetuating its institutions.”^[1] This quote aptly summarizes the gist of Richard Thomson’s latest book on French art and visual culture during the first decades of the Third Republic. The words I cite here come not from Thomson, however. Quite the contrary: they appear in President Donald J. Trump’s 2020 “Executive Order on Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture.” As the source suggests, the evocation of the classical past as a model for the present is now overwhelmingly an affair of the right. And yet, this was not always the case. The strength and indeed the urgency of *The Presence of the Past* is its demonstration of the mutability of the political significance of past art. As Thomson shows, both left and right in Third Republic France—artists, arts administrators, art historians, and politicians—sought to legitimize and enrich their art and ideology through dialogue with and emulation of Greco-Roman antiquity, the *quattrocento*, and even the painting of Peter Paul Rubens.

The Presence of the Past thus seeks to demonstrate, as Thomson puts it in the introduction, “the extent to which the citation and transmission of these past styles far from being feebly derivative or ploddingly academic, was in fact dynamic, purposeful, innovative and controversial” (p. 10). In doing so, it covers “a great deal of ground” (p. 67). Indeed, Thomson’s account brings in dozens of artists with divergent aesthetic and political positions, all evoking disparate models from the past, over several long decades of dramatic social change. Organizing this complex history was clearly a challenge, and readers will no doubt feel buried at times by the range and quantity of information in the book. Nevertheless, the text can be managed by recognizing an implicit logic articulated around three familiar dyads: present/past, left/right, and avant-garde/academic. The standard view is that the left-hand terms stay on the left, and the right-hand ones stay on the right, at least in the late nineteenth century. Hence, with some minor exceptions, Realism, Impressionism, and Post-Impressionism stand as the only resources available at the time for a progressive artistic imagination. Over the course of five extended chapters, Thomson effectively dismantles that presumption.

Chapter one concerns “The Third Republic’s Classical Vocabulary.” Focusing mostly on official commissions, the chapter treats the contestation over the political use of Greco-Roman antiquity. Both conservatives like Philippe de Chennevières and republicans like Mario Proth found classical art the best model for French art of the 1870s and indeed for French culture more broadly defined. While the right might have found “cultural continuity” (p. 58) with Gallo-Roman history, especially in the south, the *mid*i, for the moderate left, classical art “could communicate appropriate ideological messages to the citizens of today, [revealing] the republican *mentalité* which habitually linked contemporary France to classical antiquity” (p. 29). The positive reception of the work of artists like Paul Milliet, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, and others exemplifies the success of this official Third Republic classicism. Likewise, Puvis’s commission for the Boston Public Library and Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi’s *Statue of Liberty* in New York showed the trans-Atlantic perception that “classicism and republicanism went hand in hand” (p. 31). Distinctive to France was the deep investment in classical education within the public *lycées*. Artists like Louis Anquetin, Bartholdi, Edgar Degas, Maurice Denis, Jean-Léon Gérôme, and Gustave Moreau were at various times the products of this system. While sometimes attacked as elitist, the engrained classicism in education and public art commissions produced a receptive audience for the emulation of the past among a wide range of French citizens. Crucially, as Thomson argues, “What bound together this apparently incoherent diversity was the early Third Republic’s ingrained assumptions about the value of the classical culture inherited from the Greco-Roman world” (p. 67).

The next section of *The Presence of the Past* turns dramatically to an artist usually conceived as opposed to French classicism: Peter Paul Rubens. The chapter title frames the reception of the artist in dyadic political terms: “The Rumbustious Rubensian: Reactionary or Republican?” At first glance, the evidence seems obviously to suggest the former. In 1873, the new conservative *Directeur des Beaux-Arts* laid out a plan to decorate the Palais du Luxembourg, explicitly calling for a revival of Rubens. Northern and Catholic, closely tied to the French monarchy, the seventeenth-century Flemish Baroque painter had long stood as model for aristocratically-oriented taste, his sensualist use of color folding effortlessly into Rococo. At a moment when anti-republican politics still dominated in France, the choice was surely uncontroversial. As a counterpoint to the first chapter’s articulation of a republican classicism, a reactionary Rubenisme would seem all but inevitable. “Paradoxically,” as Thomson shows, “Rubens could also be appropriated by republicanism and the left” (p. 75). Exemplary of this paradox is Jules Dalou’s *Triomphe de la République* of 1879–99, which still dominates the Place de la Nation in Paris. Although Dalou’s monumental sculpture usurps whole-hog a Rubensian feminine allegory for the purposes of “anticlerical republicanism” (p. 88), more often Rubens was simply redefined as a naturalist. The painter’s supposedly “direct and unflinching observation of the physical world and human behaviour” (p. 76) was trumpeted by a wide array of period writers from Hippolyte Taine to Émile Zola. Among artists, his sensualist naturalism appealed to the likes of Anquetin and Degas, as well as Albert Besnard, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Alfred Roll. Although artists such as these could be associated with a moderate republicanism, the appeal of Rubens does not seem to have retained much of a political charge. Paul Cezanne stands out in this regard. The *aquasixtain* artist, so firmly rooted in the *mid*i, looked to Rubens primarily for what Thomson calls a “sense of dynamism and *sensation* constrained by composition” (p. 93).^[2] This seems correct, but the larger stakes of Cezanne’s investment in Rubens as a precedent for his own art remain to be fleshed out. “Rubens’s art was a model deeply engrained in French visual culture,” Thomson asserts, “It offered an antidote to the regularity and austerity of certain types of classicism, and was easily adapted to naturalism’s appetite for the actual and the carnal” (p. 103).

While “paradoxically” the adaptation of Rubens “worked for the Republic” (p. 103), this seems to have been more the result of a broader depoliticization than any political reorientation. The same might be said of the rising interest in classical art among avant-garde artists of the 1880s, to which Thomson turns in the following chapter.

Chapter three, “The Originality of Tradition: Classicism and the Avant-Garde,” turns back to the reception of Greco-Roman antiquity in the Third Republic. Noting that Naturalism eventually arose as a kind house style for republican culture in contrast to the classical, Thomson acknowledges that certain popular artists like Raphaël Collin sought to integrate the seemingly contradictory elements of the two styles. The classical past appears more prominently, and interestingly, within the avant-garde. On the one hand, quotations from sculptures in the Louvre are common. For example, Degas’s 1886 *Le Tub*, now in the Musée d’Orsay, evokes the ancient statue known as the *Vénus de Vienne*. Likewise, Anquetin and Paul Gauguin directly borrow poses from the *Ergastines* frieze of the Parthenon. On the other hand, Cezanne and others deliberately evoke a classical landscape tradition, stretching back through Claude Lorrain to the Latin past in the *midi*. Here Thomson interestingly suggests that Cezanne may not have looked to the seventeenth century as much as to an earlier nineteenth-century tradition of academic landscape painting exemplified by the *marseillais* Prosper François de Barrigue de Fontainieu. At the core of this chapter is an account of the work of Georges Seurat. Following Thomson, his *Bathers (Asnières)* references Nicolas Poussin’s *Finding of Moses*, the *Sunday on the Grande Jatte* looks to the Parthenon frieze, and aspects of *Chahut* “recall ancient Greek painted pottery” (p. 123). These and other works “discreetly cite and fuse forms of representation from ancient Greece with those of modern Paris” (p. 124). Seurat’s classicism is well-known, in large part due to Thomson’s earlier work, but here it takes on new significance within the context of the politics of classical art established in chapter one. And yet, Thomson presents surprisingly few of these avant-garde works in political terms. The only painting here mentioned that obviously combines the artistic avant-garde with classicism and progressive politics is Paul Signac’s *Au temps d’harmonie* of 1893–1895. The anarchist utopia depicted in this large painting arguably conjures a Latin pastoral in the modern *midi*. “Here,” Thomson declares, “was an avant-garde artist again consulting the classical tradition for a project assertively radical in style and ideology” (p. 129). Given the exceptional nature of Signac’s work and its significance for the conjunction of art and politics in this period, it is unfortunate here that Thomson does not reference Margaret Werth’s important work on Signac and a similar strain of the “idyllic” in French art. [3] The emphasis of these two art historians is different, of course, but they share a concern with an “interweaving pattern of dialogue with the past and in particular with the classical” (p. 151).

The fourth chapter in *The Presence of the Past* turns to the legacy of the art of fifteenth-century Italy. The chapter title, “Fra Angelico has been put out to stud’: Quoting the Quattrocento,” jokingly references a racehorse named after the painter, but it captures the widespread sense that French art could be conceived as the heir of Florence. Museum collections and art historical writing had long valorized the art of Botticelli, Fra Angelico, and Masaccio, but a resurgence of interest in their art reached a crest in the mid-1890s. Thomson explains this in terms parallel to the interest in classicism and Rubens: “What Italian art of that period offered was striving for realistic exactitude and the idealisation of form, in other words a counter to the descriptive naturalism and École prescriptions which so dominated the contemporary Salons” (p. 154). An interest in Italian-style portrait busts in the work of sculptors like Camille Claudel and Dalou marked one kind of revival of the past, a revival that risked a stale historicism or a descent down “the path of pastiche” (p. 172). Some, like Berthe Morisot, drew direct inspiration from Botticelli

without visibly imitating his style. For the artists who could balance innovation and reverence for the early Renaissance, the biggest question was political. Did an admiration for Florentine art rest on an “assumption of a common republican lineage linking ancient Athens, the republics of *quattrocento* Italy and modern France” (p. 169)? Some certainly made this equation. Others saw the revival of early Renaissance art fitting more comfortably within a resurgent Catholicism. Maurice Denis exemplifies this latter position. His art was, as Thomson puts it, “an act of resistance: against the entrenched academic idealism of antiquity and the later Renaissance, against *laïque* republicanism, against hegemonic naturalism, against the taste of the masses” (p. 191). More elitist even than classicism, the quotation of the *quattrocento* in France fed into cultural decadence and nationalism in equal measures.

The last chapter of the book, “Classicism for the New Century,” moves out of the nineteenth century. By 1900, Thomson argues, classical culture was a deeply engrained “*mentalité* of the French republican establishment” (p. 193). The seeds of the republican elite planted in the classically-drenched *lycées* flowered at the turn of the century. The brothers Solomon and Théodore Reinach exemplify the persistence of republican classicism, the former writing school textbooks and the latter building a home, the Villa Kérylos, in southern France, directly reviving ancient Greek architecture. However elitist, they held to the conviction “that France and *la civilisation* were the proper heirs of Greek perfection” (p. 208). Another set of brothers, René and Louis Ménéard, echo the wider “instilling of the culture of classical antiquity in the early generations of the Third Republic” (p. 208). In 1905, the son of René Ménéard, also named René, produced a series of decorative paintings for the Sorbonne depicting the ruins of antiquity, but insistently employing a modern naturalistic style. Other artists around this time turned to classicism and movement, combining dance and film with references to Greek statues. The sculptors Aristide Maillol and Antoine Bourdelle in turn reimagined those classical statues for the new century. Denis’s own classicism developed beyond the early pastiche of the *quattrocento*, reimagining ancient Greece in scenes of bathing in Brittany. A 1908 commission for the Russian collector Ivan Morosov of the story of Cupid and Psyché brings the account well into the twentieth century, demonstrating “the continued vitality of the classical in the national culture” (p. 236).

The conclusion, “The Confidence of Continuity,” also pushes beyond the titular endpoint of 1905. This date clearly coincides with the infamous reception of Henri Matisse and his colleagues at the Salon d’Automne, whose brilliantly colored canvases surrounded a faux-*quattrocento* bust—“Donatello chez les fauves,” declared the critic Louis Vauxcelles.^[4] Ménéard’s *L’Âge d’Or* of 1908, again completed for the Sorbonne, once again offers a clear quotation from the Parthenon frieze, this time set against a background depicting the forest of Fontainebleau, likely close the family home where his uncle Louis had written his book about Greek culture. The painting appears on the cover of *The Presence of the Past* and marks its terminus. In conclusion, Thomson writes that the classical past “was so deeply ingrained in the *mentalité* that, one way or another, it would often surface, giving a characteristic texture to France’s national culture” (p. 250).

The term *mentalité* appears frequently in this book. It flows through Thomson’s earlier work on this period, and although not explicitly acknowledged as such, it serves as a binding methodological glue.^[5] The word is never really defined, however, and its relation to the *Annales* school of French historical writing is never referenced. Its usage nonetheless corresponds to the standard dictionary definition: “outlook: set of ideas, values, and beliefs shared by a community.”^[6] In this respect, Thomson’s consistent concern with period *mentalités* revives

some of the “cardinal questions” of art historical inquiry, questions best articulated by Karl Mannheim more than sixty years ago, “whose mentality is recorded by given art objects? What is their social identity? What action, situations and what tacit choices furnish the perspectives in which artists perceive and represent some aspect of reality? If works of art reflect points of view, beliefs, affirmations, who are the protagonists and who are the antagonists? Whose reorientation is reflected in the changes of style?”[7]

Such questions have, in recent decades, been more commonly associated with a Marxist-inflected ideology critique. This is not exactly Thomson’s concern. He occasionally equates *mentalité* with ideology, but he does so in the sense of “a manner or the content of thinking characteristic of an individual, group, or culture.”[8] Still, it might have been instructive to think of the political revivals of the past in Third Republic France in a more radical way, one that acknowledges how “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”[9] A different history of this art and this period might thus emerge, one that casts the *lycées* as Ideological State Apparatuses and art as a domain of contestation between classes. That history remains to be written.

In the end, an unanswered question persists at the core of *The Presence of the Past*: is it even necessary to have a political account of style? The mutability of style in political terms, as articulated in this book, rests on the presumption—integral to any postmodern ideology—that there is no core or essential politics in any given style. All styles can be appropriated to political ends, and consequently no style should be understood as significantly political. I would hazard that most everyone reading this agrees. Today, we seem only to decry the defense of one style over another. As the American Institute of Architects put it in response to the draft of Trump’s 2020 Executive Order, “There are many examples of beautiful and innovative buildings in all styles of architecture, including the styles explicitly mentioned in the draft executive order: Classicist, Brutalist, Spanish Colonial.”[10] Greco-Roman antiquity, the *quattrocento*, Rubens: for the early Third Republic, for both left and right, there were, after all, many examples of beautiful and innovative artworks in all styles.

NOTES

[1] President Donald J. Trump, “Executive Order on Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture,” December 21, 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-promoting-beautiful-federal-civic-architecture/>, accessed October 5, 2022.

[2] Throughout the book, Thomson spells Cezanne’s name without an acute accent. Here he follows a recent decision by the Société Paul Cézanne. See Anna Brady, “Drop the accent? Cézanne’s acute dilemma,” *The Art Newspaper* January 9, 2020, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/01/09/drop-the-accent-cezannes-acute-dilemma>, accessed October 5, 2022.

[3] Margaret Werth, *The Joy of Life: The Idyllic in French Art circa 1900* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

[4] Louis Vauxcelles, “Le Salon d’Automne,” *Supplément à Gil Blas* 17 October 1905, n.p.

[5] See Richard Thomson, *The Troubled Republic: Visual Culture and Social Debate in France, 1889–1900* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004); and Thomson, *Art of the Actual: Naturalism and Style in Early Third Republic France, 1880–1900* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012).

[6] “Mentalité,” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mentalité>.

[7] Karl Mannheim, “Digression on Art History,” in *Essays on the Sociology of Culture* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1956), 33.

[8] “Ideology,” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ideology>.

[9] Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 153.

[10] “AIA issues letter to President Trump opposing proposed executive order,” February 6, 2020, <https://www.aia.org/press-releases/6264391-aia-issues-letter-to-president-trump-oppos>, accessed October 5, 2022.

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