Jiri Daschitzky, Broadside of the Comet of 1577 (as Reported by Peter Codicillus).
The Prix de Rome: Images of Authority and Threshold of Official Success

The PRIX DE ROME—the phrase scarcely retains the aura of magic it once possessed. Yet the fierce competition, the implacable envy, and sleepless anxiety surrounding the contests still carry a lesson for the present epoch. It is indeed the first Academy Award, except that it is difficult to imagine a nineteenth-century Marlon Brando refusing to accept it. In any event, I feel very privileged to have the opportunity to discuss this institution, and I thank John Dobkin and the National Academy of Design for their Prix de New York, which made it possible.

When I first journeyed to Paris twenty years ago in search of the then elusive curriculum of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts—still fresh in my mind from undergraduate days as the butt of innumerable art historical jokes—I was astonished to learn that the French themselves generally took a dim view towards the once sacrosanct house of learning. All the available Ecole resources were put at my disposal, however—the minutes of the faculty meetings, the sketches and paintings for the periodic competitions, and finally the Prix de Rome judgments, the tracings of their sketches, and the winning pictures themselves. Much of the material was moldy and covered with a thick layer of dust—I must have sneezed my way through a hundred years of the Ecole curriculum—and the sketches were arranged in long rows on the floor of a room so dark that it reminded me of a dungeon. As I stood there one afternoon contemplating the deplorable state of what were to me precious treasures, I was seized with the strange and wonderful inspiration that I was destined to salvage them for posterity. Henceforth I had a mission to accomplish.

I finished my dissertation at Columbia University in February 1968, just two months before the political demonstrations rocked the campus and all but ended education there for the remainder of the year. Throughout the world, schools and universities began to feel the effect of vociferous student protests against their campuses’ relations to the defense establishment and autocratic control of curricula. I could not help identifying much of what was happening with my research on academic administration in the nineteenth century. Indeed, at the very moment of the Columbia upheaval I had begun writing a spinoff article on the reforms of 1863 that wrested the Ecole des Beaux-Arts from the control of the Academy and put it in under the jurisdiction of a government agency. Those reforms touched off noisy demonstrations in the courtyards of the Ecole and the Louvre, and on the Pont des Arts leading to the Institut de France. The terminology I used in the first draft actually derived from the vocabulary of committed activists demonstrating just two blocks away, but how could it have been otherwise when the documents of 1863 mentioned gendarmes seizing innocent passers-by with long hair as student demonstrators? Ironically, that confrontation was repeated in May 1968 when French art students seized the buildings of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and transformed them into a factory for posters declaring the revolution. Their revolt narrowly failed to overthrow the government of President de Gaulle, but it did succeed in ending the Prix de Rome competitions. Nineteen sixty-eight was the last year of the Grand Prix; in 1970 the government issued a decree that reorganized the French Academy at Rome and officially eliminated competitions as the basis for determining admission to the Academy.

There was a paradoxical character to my interest in the academic program of the Ecole: despite its oppressive features, its exclusion from general art historical discourse predisposed me to view it as the underdog of modern scholarship, which was then preoccupied almost exclusively with either the avant-garde or Old Masters. I was attacked for dealing with mediocrities and bureaucratic art, but this only reinforced my perception that a traditional belief system was being threatened, and I probed deeper. Still imbued with mission fervor, I felt it necessary to amplify the historical context by reinstating into mainstream discussion the programmatic components of the French art complex. I could even justify my attempt as a “radical” act, questioning traditional scholarly biases just as my contemporaries were examining the social, official, and academic policies in other areas of national and international life.

Now I find myself here in February 1984—at a moment when conservative forces everywhere have taken the high road—asked to review a comprehensively organized exhibition of the Prix de Rome and the impressively documented catalogue that accompanies it. My general sense of the event is that we are witnessing a return to authority and a desire for authority in the realm of culture. Jacques Thuillier’s introduction to the catalogue emphasizes the dominant geographical and historical centrality of the Beaux-Arts institution: “Installed for more than a century and a half right in the heart of Paris, on the left bank of the Seine, facing the Louvre, this Ecole des Beaux-Arts is incontestably the oldest in the world and the most prestigious.” The catalogue then presents its exhaustively researched contents without embellishment, interpretation, or critical examination. The Prix de Rome pieces are paraded before us as demonstrable achievements, as if the judgments of the academic juries have stood the test of time. That dehistoricizing approach tends to treat these works as unique specimens and, thereby, to elevate them to the status of recognized masterpieces. And their evident skill and full narrative content appear to our eyes as a refreshing riposte to modernistic experiments.

It is an irony of the reversal of taste that has occurred within the last decade that the present socialist government in France has espoused modernism and rejected academicism, while the United States increasingly favors academicism over modernism. Naturally, the present French regime remembers only too well the association of rear-guard and figurative art with the Communist Left after World War II and wants nothing to do with it. When the already scheduled Prix de Rome exhibition came before the new Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, he immediately canceled it with the backing of the new director of the Ecole, Francois Wehrlin, also a Mitterand appointee. It was at this point that the United States, represented by the International Exhibitions Foundation, Washington, D.C., decided to organize and circulate an American tour of the show.

I see a danger in this: I happen to be one of those who believe in representation, in works that give spectators their money’s worth and their minds’ worth. But I also believe that representation must spring from the artist’s need to communicate some strongly felt response to, or assessment of, the human condition. I am uncomfortable that Americans have jumped to sponsor this show of Prix
de Rome paintings without some form of scholarly clarification of their historical role. Although the revival of interest in the subject was sparked by Americans and promoted by Americans, this involvement should not be taken willy-nilly as a willingness to endorse uncritically an attempt to reinstate the claims of Beaux-Arts supremacy.

My discussion, therefore, is an attempt to rectify this omission of scholarly responsibility. Otherwise, I can envision a future in which the Prix de Rome mentality dominates our cultural activity and the corporate world takes over the competition for glorifying its products and insuring loyalty to its system. IBM could sponsor a new version of the contest with its first program calling for “An Allegorical Depiction of the Thomas J. Watson Research Center at Armonk.” There could be two preliminary trials: a drawing of a stylized corporate logo and a sketch of a monumentalized microchip. The candidates would enter an executive suite for seventy-two days, and the winner would become a Vice-President of Sales.

The practice of manipulating creativity and culture in the interests of a dominant group is transparently clear in the Prix de Rome contests. The first thing about the show that strikes the eye is the relentless uniformity of the product. We are dazzled by the remarkably consistent skill of the contestants, but it is often difficult to tell them apart. This was as much a problem for the nineteenth-century juries as it is for modern ones; the judgments are rarely concluded with clear-cut verdicts, which suggests that the homogeneous character of the entries caused endless headaches for the referees. More than any other ingredient of the academic system, the Prix de Rome confirms the regimentation of the neophytes and the existence of rigidly imposed guidelines. None of this is new, of course, but now the data provide overwhelming confirmation. Year after year, the participants conformed to a tradition resistant to change and in the process yielded up their imaginative faculties and experience of the present.

The Baron Gros claimed that his job as an École professor was “to mold artists and send them to Italy at the government’s expense.” This indicates the extent to which the private atelier was organized to supply specialized training for the Prix de Rome. The tournament stood at the apex of the École’s series of competitions. To qualify one had to be French, male, unmarried, under thirty years of age at the time of the preliminary trials, and had to have won a first medal in the secondary contests known as the concours d’émulation. A masculine ideology dominated both the structure and content of the competitions; at stake was nothing less than the perpetuation of a national ideal. Gros’s use of the term “mold” was not fortuitous: the preparation of the Prix de Rome involved a form of political indoctrination and even thought control.

Let me trace the origins of this institution. Its essential character dates from the moment Louis XIV and his Minister Colbert incorporated the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture into their plan of political and economic centralization. They had very distinct ideas as to how art should be used, and it was under their supervision that the Academy systematized its pedagogical procedures and formulated basic conventions. They granted the Academy a monopoly over life drawing, for example, thereby hoping to control the imagery produced by French artists. Although the outside ban on life drawing was impossible to enforce, the idea of this monopoly became so fixed in the popular mind that to this day the term académie is used to designate paintings and drawings of the nude model.

The Academy also instituted a hierarchy of modes, or ranking of subject categories according to their accepted order of significance. History painting, or scenes from sacred and classical literature, stood at the top of the scale, with still life, landscape, and genre pictures at the bottom. The rank of the artists in the Academy (and hence in society) depended on the category in which they worked; only those artists who practiced history painting could achieve positions in the Academy’s administrative hierarchy as officers and directors, and only they could be designated First Painter to the King. Now history painting was expanded to include subjects that directly or indirectly glorified the king. Depictions of the king on horseback with
or without a battle backdrop, glorifications of his ancestors, or attempts to link him by way of allusion to mythological heroes were classified as legitimate subjects for the history painter—both Louis XIV, “The Sun King,” and his successor Louis XV allowed themselves to be identified with the solar deity Apollo. Thus the authority of history painting ultimately derived from its intimate connection with the royal effigy.

Significantly, one of the most striking connections between academic practice and royal interest in this early period may be found in the subjects of the first Prix de Rome contests. These include Fame Proclaiming the Marvels of the Reign of Louis XIV to the Four Quarters of the Globe and Presenting them his Portrait (1655), The King Granting Peace to Europe (1671), and Louis XIV Crossing the Rhine (1673). Although this direct connection becomes less apparent in later years, we shall see that its spirit was preserved rather consistently in the competitions. Their programs took as their point of departure the apotheosis of dominance and power and incorporated it into the standards of high art. Such adjectives for history painting as haut, grand, and élevé are those used also to refer to those who ruled in the political domain and for whom the works were intended. Notions of superiority in academic taste point specifically to the needs of the ruler or dominant group. The endless repetition of themes centering on enthroned mon-

archs or some aspect of classical authority may be traced to the ideological aspirations of Louis XIV.

The call for “high” standards and the preservation of past authority for benefit of the present dictated the activities of the pensioners at Rome. Students in Rome were required to reproduce the well-known masterpieces and monuments and to send the reproductions back to Paris. Thus, the images of power and wealth were transferred to the reigning class in the home country. Indeed, the first Prix de Rome nominees were valued not so much for their originality as for their ability to replicate existing objects. Louis XIV and Colbert wanted multiple editions of all the treasures in Rome, and their demand survived as a fundamental element of the Prix de Rome tradition. Ever after, pensioners at Rome were required to execute as part of their annual obligations, or envois, a careful copy of a recognized masterpiece, which became the property of the state.

The establishment of the Prix de Rome had as its object the recruiting of talented artists in the service of the Court. Article X of the first regulations for pensioners required that all those privileged to make the trip work exclusively for the king: they were to make copies of all the beautiful pictures in Rome if they were painters, to model statues after the antique if they were sculptors, and to execute plans and elevations of all the beautiful palaces and edifices in Rome and its suburbs if they were architects. Colbert restated his intentions to the Director of the French Academy at Rome in 1672: “Make the painters copy everything beautiful in Rome; and when they have finished, if possible, make them do it again.”

The French Academy at Rome, the home-away-from-home for the Prix de Rome winners, served as a kind of colonial headquarters for the extraction of aesthetic wealth. The fabulous enterprises undertaken to embellish the king’s chambers, the royal gardens, libraries, and galleries are breathtaking in their ambition: casts of the statues of Montecavallo, of the Marcus Aurelius of the Campidoglio, and of the works in the Borghese and Ludovisi Gardens. Every June a ship left Marseilles for Civitavecchia to pick up copies of the works of artists like Raphael and Carracci—the Farnese frescoes seem to have been a favorite—destined for the galleries of the Tuileries and Versailles. Everything ran like clockwork, with casts and copies handled like precious stuffs from the Orient; on the return from Civitavecchia the ship went through the Strait of Gibraltar, arrived at Rouen, and was carefully unloaded under the watchful eye of a sculptor, and its cargo then transported to the spacious hotel-warehouse bequeathed by Cardinal Richelieu to Louis XIV.

This dazzling efficiency depended on the regimentation of the Academy and its acolytes. Reveille commenced at 5:00 A.M.; between 6:00 and 8:00 A.M. every day the pensioners sketched from the live model, and then they took off for their copying sites. They often irritated aristocratic collectors, cardinals, and popes because of their carelessness and even outright vandalism. Tracings were made directly on the originals, and one pensioner even washed and effaced several passages from Domenichino’s cycle of St. Cecilia to get a good look at details. (Undoubtedly, he had heady notions of what a French artist could do in San Luigi de’ Francesi.) Threats between both governments were exchanged, but somehow things returned to normal, and the palazzi and galleries were again inundated by pensioners.

The political and military functions of the French Academy have yet to be fully understood, but it clearly served as a center of diplomatic and social intrigue. Students were used as appropriate embellishments to sustain the cultural image. Louis XIV’s ambassador to Rome, the Duc de Chaumont, was requested to keep a close watch on the institution and monitor its activities. Colbert requested that the Duchesse de Chaumont make herself available at the
Academy for visits and receptions, convinced that her presence would instill in the pensioners a sense of loyalty to the crown and enhance their self-esteem. At the same time, the young artists also developed ties to the social elite who would call on them for portrait and other commissions.

After the Academy was installed in the Palazzo Mancini in 1725, high society gathered there en masse. Visiting royalty and diplomats from all Europe assembled on the balcony to watch la corsa dei barbati, the race of the wild horses. The Cardinal de Polignac sent French officers to wait on the foreign aristocrats with rinfreschi. This was not done merely out of hospitality, since very often diplomatic messages were exchanged on these occasions. As a diplomatic gesture, the French Academy at Rome also housed young artists from other countries; the King of Spain lodged two pensioners there in the 1720s when there was a thaw in the theretofore hostile relationship between France and Spain. Later, under Napoleon, the Academy resembled an International House.

It is not surprising that the French Academy at Rome, like embassies, assumed a distinctly political status and was subject to siege during moments of international crisis. In 1792 a popular uprising in Rome threatened the Palazzo Mancini, and the Director and pensioners were forced to flee to Naples. Six years later, following a French declaration of war against the kingdoms of Naples and Sardinia, the Palazzo was vandalized by Neapolitans.

Taking his cue from Louis XIV and Colbert, Napoleon took a special interest in the Rome Academy as a means of controlling art production. He enacted the shift of the Academy to its definitive location at the spacious Villa Medici in 1803. The Villa Medici belonged to the Duke of Tuscany, son of the Austrian emperor, when Napoleon transformed the Duchy of Tuscany into the Kingdom of Etruria by the Treaty of Lunéville; authority was transferred to the young Duke of Parma to whom the Villa Medici now passed. Since Napoleon was the virtual ruler of Italy he ordered the new king to arrange the transfer of the property to the French nation.

During the Restoration, the Duchy was returned to the Grand Duke, who threatened to sue for the return of the Villa Medici on the grounds that it had been seized illegally. In an uncommon gesture, the Bourbon government refused to restore this vestige of Bonapartism. It argued that no other culture had greater right to the "august" residence of a family whose tree included Marie de’ Medici, wife of Henri IV, founder of the Bourbon dynasty. "What nobler use," the French reply continued, "can there be of this Villa than to consecrate it, as France has done, to the cult of the arts? What more appropriate way to encourage genius than to extend the taste of Cosimo and Lorenzo de’ Medici?" Clearly, the specter of Renaissance Italy and its powerful ruling-class patrons continued to haunt the French quest for an art representative of domination.

As its predecessors had done, the government of the Restoration used the Villa Medici for political purposes. In 1829 Chateaubriand organized in its gardens a grandiose reception for the Grand Duchess Helena of Russia, his swan song as ambassador of Charles X. The Grand Duchess was married to the brother of the reactionary Czar Nicholas, who ascended the throne in 1826 and immediately entered into an Alliance with France and England against the Ottoman Empire. Close ties developed between France and Russia in the wake of that coalition's devastating defeat of the Turkish and Egyptian navies at Navarino in 1827, which ended the strife between Greece and Turkey and secured to the allies important trade advantages. Nicholas, who had much to gain from recognition of Greek independence, consented for the sake of appearances to cooperate with the other powers in a settlement of the Greek question. The reception in the gardens of the Villa Medici was a celebration of these relations, but the festivities of the moment would soon be overshadowed by the Revolution of 1830, which toppled Charles X from the throne of France.

The Villa Medici's political functions continued into a more recent epoch; abandoned after the outbreak of World War II, it operated as a military base during the occupation of 1944 when it housed French military personnel. Charles de Gaulle made the site the culmination of a majestic procession during his visit to Italy that same year.

The revolutionary events of 1968 raised questions about the relationship of the École to the State and proved as momentous to the pedagogical system as did the suppression of the Royal Academy in 1793 (which left the branch at Rome untouched) and the reforms of 1863. In the wake of that crisis Malraux radically altered the system, eliminating the Prix de Rome in 1969 and revamping the Rome Academy by the decree of September 16, 1970. Balthus, then Director of the Rome branch, intensified the reorganization that he had begun with his appointment in 1961. Henceforth, prospective pensioners would be chosen on the basis of a written proposal and supporting documents, much as Guggenheim Fellows or applicants for the American Academy Rome Prize are chosen. The Villa Medici now functions as a kind of cultural think tank for the government, where critics, art historians, conservationists, photographers, and cinematographers explore the possibilities of various mediums and round out the tra-
alliance of throne and altar—was rooted in the Middle Ages and the Crusades. Blacas had carried to Rome in the autumn of 1815 proposals for a fresh Concordat between Church and State, which would supersede that signed by Pope Pius VII and Napoleon, that involved far-reaching concessions to the Church. At the same time, Blacas ordered the refurbishing of the Church of the Trinité-des-Monts (Trinità dei Monti), founded by the French and located on the Pincio close to the French Academy.

Blacas decided to employ the pensioners for his program, substituting for their annual envois decorations for the chapels. Blacas also put to work gifted former pensioners like Ingres who hung around Rome after their Prix de Rome stipends ran out. First he indoctrinated Ingres into the fold by hiring him to copy a miniature of Louis XVIII, a prelude to a host of important commissions that weaned the young painter away from Bonapartist classicism and pushed him to artistic leadership under the new regime. In 1817 Blacas commissioned him to execute the Jesus Christ Giving the Keys to Peter for the altar of Trinité-des-Monts and the Henri IV Playing with His Children, a work contributing significantly to the tendency known as the troubadour style, which became the rage during the Restoration. The medievalizing fashion suited the regime’s dream of the Old Order, and in this case Blacas chose a theme dear to its heart, since Henri IV was the founder of the Bourbon dynasty.

Ingres completed the Jesus Christ Giving the Keys to Peter in 1820, and Blacas and the entire French colony in Rome loved it. Related to contemporary examples by the Nazarenes, also based in Rome, Ingres’s picture participated in the revival of religious painting in the nineteenth century. The realization marks the transition of Ingres from a Napoleonic-classical painter to the culture hero of the Ultraroyalists, those conservatives for whom he painted his famous Vow of Louis XIII—the pictorial projection of the Restoration’s renewed alliance of Throne and Altar—a few years later. It is in this way that the Prix de Rome system provided for the art production of the state.

Naturally, Ingres probably never thought he was being used; from his perspective he was simply conforming to high ideals. He possessed a rigid mind and an authoritarian sensibility, which meshed well with the academic outlook if not always with its specific content. It was easier for a contestant with his type of personality to do well in the Prix de Rome competitions. In 1893 Georges Rouault went en loge to compete for the

Fig. 5 William Bouguereau, Zenobia Discovered by Shepherds on the Banks of the Araxes, 1850, oil on canvas, 57¾ × 44½". Paris, École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts.
The judgments were demonstrably subject to political pressure. The changeover in regime in 1816 probably explains the switch in that year’s ballot- ing. During the preliminary selection, the first prize was awarded to No. 9, Lancrenon, the second to No. 7, Schnetz, and an honorable mention went to No. 10. But the final judgment of the afternoon accorded the palm to No. 2, Thomas, not even mentioned in the first selection. Looking closely at the records, we find that Lancrenon was a student of Girodet and Schnetz a disciple of David and Gros. As a regicide and faithful adherent of Bonaparte who had signed the acte additionnel when the emperor returned to power for the Hundred Days in 1815, David was persona non grata in the society of the Restoration. David’s disciple Delécluze, recounting his last meeting with the master on January 12, 1816, ended by observing that the day after the master left Paris “The school and the principles of David were almost universally rejected.” Thus Thomas, a student of Vincent, was promoted above his rivals from the Davidian school despite their superior merit. Underlining this political consideration is the reappearance for the first time since the ancien régime of the title of Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts to designate the members of the Fine Arts establishment. The royal ordinance that substituted the new name for the Class of Fine Arts of the Institut (as it had been called since 1795) was enacted on March 21 during the time the contest was in progress. The records state that on March 19 the Class of Fine Arts of the Institut met to judge the first trial, whereas on July 13 they declare that the “members of the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts” assembled for the final judgment.

The program of the 1816 contest also indicates how a seemingly generalized Prix de Rome subject could contain a contemporary political reference. The theme of the definitive trial that year was the unusual Oenone Refusing to Heal Paris. It may be recalled that Oenone was the lover of Paris before he deserted her for Helen of Troy. Near the end of the Trojan War, Paris was agonizingly wounded by a poisoned arrow shot by Philoctetes. At the moment of his greatest suffering he remembered that Oenone, his first love, knew all kinds of remedies and had once promised to heal him if he was ever wounded. But when he sent for her, her bitterness over his desertion hardened her heart to his pleas and she left him to die in torment. Thomas’s rendition of the story emphasizes the precise moment of her rejection and abandonment of Paris. We may interpret Paris, with his Phrygian bonnet—adopted by the First Republic as a symbol of liberty—as the sower of discord and war, and thus Oenone’s gesture should be seen as symbolic of the Restoration’s repudiation of the revolutionary and Napoleonic epochs.

This brings us to the matter of social and topical meaning in the Prix de Rome subjects of the nineteenth century. Although none of these are so blatant as the first subjects devoted to the exploits of Louis XIV—here and there we catch glimmerings and even outright flashes of real life—they, too, most often reflect the underlying theme of glorified authority. During the reign of Napoleon, for example, several of the programs involved battlefield situations—such as Achilles Receiving the Ambassadors of Agamemnon and Aeneas and Anchises—or deference to autocrats—such as Sabinus and Epponina at the Feet of Vespasian of 1802. Sabinus was a Gaul who had broken his alliance with Rome, proclaimed himself Caesar, and then declared war on the Empire. Later, Sabinus and his wife were captured and pleaded for forgiveness for having fomented civil war. Significantly, the period during which the 1802 contest was held was marked by an assassination attempt and sordid plots against the First Consul, some authentic, others trumped up by the police for repressive purposes. Theseus Conquering the Minotaur (1807) and Priam at the Feet of Achilles (1809) further exemplify the martial heroism and battlefield gallantry that went into the Napoleonic mythmaking. Perhaps the most striking example of the Bonapartist period is the Lycurgus Presenting the Heir to the Throne (Fig. 3), a subject assigned a month after the birth of Napoleon’s son, who was named the King of Rome.

The politicization of the competitions in seen also in the response of the critic Delécluze to the presentations of the 1847 subject, the Death of Vitellius, which he denounced as examples of savagery and barbarism. He deplored a theme that gave license to the participants to depict wanton violence not only with a clear conscience but also with obvious delight, and the implications of that theme—the assassination of a ruler by Roman guards and citizens who mted out what he called “street justice”—disturbed him. There is no doubt in my mind that here Delécluze was manifesting the genuine anxieties of the supporters of the July Monarchy over the increasing popular resistance to the policies of King Louis-Philippe and his Minister Guizot. That resistance erupted into full-scale revolution just five months after the definitive judgment of the contest took place.
In 1848 no first Grand Prix was awarded, but one critic perceived Baudry's *St. Peter in the House of Mary* as a scene of a rebel chieftain cautioning silence to his followers as he unfolds his conspiratorial plans—this coming in the wake of the workers' insurrection of June 23–26.

By contrast, overt attempts to introduce progressive political ideas into the competition entries were met with ardent opposition. The sculptor Simart entered the Prix de Rome for sculpture in 1833 with a novel idea for the subject taken from La Fontaine's fable of *The Old Man and His Sons*. Simart came from an artisanal family that had supported the July Revolution, and he wanted to give his relief a positive political meaning. He put into his sketch an agricultural laborer, a warrior, and a magistrate in order to bring home the idea of a union of all classes in society, thus amplifying the fable of family unity. Simart's master, Ingres, immediately dismissed the idea as "pretentious," and their common patron, Marcotte, then Receiver-General of the Department of the Aube, advised Simart that the Prix de Rome competition was meant to demonstrate *savoir* rather than political insight. As Marcotte explained, "Your political idea could . . . seduce many people, but it is already implicit in the original fable: it has no need of being developed further, and you would do well to abandon it." In the end, Simart followed the advice of Ingres and his influential patron—and won the contest.

Napoleon III fixed on absolute control of the Beaux-Arts system and wished to make it an effective instrument of propaganda. The concepts of the Good and the Beautiful, with their appeals to classic authority, which had earlier dominated the Academy programs, were not suitable to his plan to transform Paris—and, indeed, all of France—into a modern industrial state. That required a redirection of the pedagogical system. Thus it was during his reign that the École underwent the most drastic reforms in its history. But the present exhibition ends just before that moment, and a discussion of those reforms must await a future occasion.

The pressures exerted by the Administration on the Academy in the first years of the Second Empire reveal themselves in the unprecedented series of religious subjects for the Prix de Rome. This evangelizing development indicates the early dependence of Napoleon III on the Church to consolidate his power both at home and abroad. Curiously, the theme of resurrection recurs often in the programs—an allusion, perhaps, to the rebirth of the Napoleonic hero? In any case, Sellier's *Lazarus Raised from the Dead* of 1857 marks a dramatic change of treatment in behalf of the pietistic posturing of the regime.

One exception to the series of the religious themes in the 1850s was the Caesar during the Storm (1855), a scene, analogous to that of Christ's calming of the storm and restoring courage to his disciples, in which the Roman emperor braves the wind and the waves. Now Napoleon III consciously promoted parallels between himself and the Caesars, and his followers and even his enemies used it in historical and literary productions. Napoleon III's own multivolume biography of Julius Caesar,
which he published in the next decade, demonstrates that he identified himself closely with his Roman counterpart. Although no first prize was awarded for the 1855 contest, the tračions reveal unmistakable affinities with contemporary Bonapartist imagery (Fig. 4). Seen in this light, the Prie de Rome program makes a clear reference to Napoleon III guiding the Ship of State during the perils of the Crimean War.

The Prie de Rome programs for architecture also reflect the imperial pressures. In 1854 the program called for an Edifice Consecrated to the Burial of the Sovereigns of a Great Empire and in 1858 the theme was an Imperial Hospital for the French Navy—an immediate preoccupation in light of the returning wounded from the Crimean campaign. The emperor’s colonial and expansionist policies are indicated in the 1860 and 1862 competitions: An Imperial Residence in the City of Nice (recently ceded to France by Italy) and a Palace for the Governor of Algeria, Intended Also as a Temporary Residence of the Sovereign. In 1866 the theme was A Town House in Paris for a Rich Banker, and three years later the program called for A French Embassy in the Capital of a Powerful State. Clearly, such terms as “rich” and “powerful” not only provided informative details but also helped to fix the mind of the participants on the values of the official ideology.

Despite the relentless pressures, however, progressive thinking enters, if only marginally, into the structure and content of the contests. As might be expected, much of that occurs around the moments of revolution and drastic social change. At such times, the critics and the participants seized the initiative, as in 1828 when Delécluze declared that he intended to side with the majority of student opinion over the outcome of the contest. He singled out the two works that evoked the most response, although the opinions were widely varied on their relative merits. He concluded that the final choice must depend not on any sort of rational analysis but on a subjective response. Since the sums of the virtues and defects were approximately equal in both cases, he chose the composition that radiated energy and life over the one that excelled in the execution of detail. Although Delécluze was normally a bitter opponent of Romanticism, he reflected a progressive longing for a cultural form more in keeping with his liberal political outlook in the final years of the Restoration.

The countryside, which was receiving increasing attention both politically—in the form of utopian systems—and aesthetically—in landscape and genre subjects—began to figure prominently in the Prie de Rome competitions as well. The critic Gabriel Laviron, an adherent of the utopian socialist Charles Fourier, noted that in Lebouy’s award-winning Joseph’s Coat Presented to Jacob of 1841 the shepherds were depicted with “a rare authenticity.” The pastoral character of Biennottry’s Samuel Anouncing David of 1842 and Barrias’s Cincinnatus Receiving the Envoys from the Senate of 1844 points to the passionate interest in rural life that appeared in George Sand’s novels later in the decade and gave rise to the Barbizon School. Reviewers of the 1844 contest observed that many of the entries recalled the pictures of Léopold Robert, who had earned his reputation doing genre scenes of Italian peasant life. Finally, it was felt that Bouguereau’s Zenobia Discovered by Shepherds on the Banks of the Araxes of 1850 (Fig. 5) shows authentic country people; critics appreciated the realism of both the figure lowering himself onto the bank and the shepherd removing the gourd of water from around his neck. Although Bouguereau’s picture hardly approaches the work of a Courbet or Millet, its human qualities and gestures represented an advance in Prie de Rome competitions.

In the entire array of Prie de Rome winners from 1797 to 1863 there is but one example of a contestant adding a personal expression of a politically progressive position. I can think of no more fitting way to conclude this paper than with Emile Signol’s winning entry of 1830, Meleager Taking Up Arms Again at the Solicitation of His Wife (Fig. 6). In this scene of a retired warrior returning to combat on seeing his people’s enemies storming the city walls, Signol painted a tricolor flag on the ramparts (Fig. 7), anticipating the flag fluttering from the towers of Notre Dame in Delacroix’s Liberty Leading the People. The July Revolution broke out between the time the program of the Prie de Rome had been announced and the time the definitive judgment was made. Signol clearly made the connection between the patriotic self-sacrifice of Meleager and the patriotism of Parisians during the July Days. He desperately wanted to make a personal statement and must have experienced many agonizing moments prior to his decision to add the flag.

Curiously, none of the critics mentioned the tricolor, and it is clear that they chose to ignore it. Did they see it as an inside joke or did they refrain from mentioning it from fear of ruining the candidate’s chances? It was a dangerous game for a Prie de Rome contestant to play, but Signol managed to pull it off. I believe that its success is related to the success of the revolution itself, which propelled Louis-Philippe to the throne of France and made the tricolor the emblem of fashionable liberalism. Indeed, I believe that its very presence in the picture in October 1830 helped to sway the jury’s opinion in its favor.

That such was the case is suggested by the patriotic rhetoric that spilled from the Academy’s reports on the envois from Rome that year, written on October 30 just one week after the Prie de Rome judgment. The report began with unexpected praise for the recent political change:

The sudden and glorious revolution, which is regenerating our beautiful land and has established the throne on the love of country, will be advantageous for the arts. It is our duty as artists, therefore, to salut the new era, and to find in it the measure of fresh success and palms for the national glory.

The report continues with flattering terms for Louis-Philippe; he is described as regarding protection of the fine arts as “one of the most beautiful privileges of his crown,” and as setting an example of patriotism that “guides the artist’s inspiration towards great and generous thoughts,” and as exuding a “spirit of nobility that employs the arts without suppression and protects them without enslavement.” Finally, “Such a hope cannot fail to rekindle the zeal of our young artists, and give an even more vital stimulus to works already rich in happy effects.” Given the favorable moment for expressions of patriotism, it is probable that Signol’s courageous decision was the happiest of his life.

But that moment of liberalism soon passed, and the Academy rapidly returned to form as it adjusted itself to the changing political scene. Signol, however, encouraged by his spectacular success tried to expand on his personal approach during his stay at Rome. For his envoi in 1832 he submitted to the Academy an allegorical figure of Liberty clearly inspired by Delacroix. Playing it cool, the academicians recognized its patriotic implications, praised its “vigorous execution,” and even noted that it indicates “a talent destined for great enterprises.” At the same time, however, the Academy warned Signol to start getting serious and to begin studying in earnest the work of the Old Masters. By 1834 Signol was satisfying his mentors: his Entombment of Christ was enthusiastically received, and they noted with relief that Signol was taking seriously their criticism by curtailing his facility and beginning in an entirely new direction.
Twenty-eight years later, around the time of the last Prix de Rome contest in this exhibition, the much-chastened Signor was a highly respected professor at the École des Beaux-Arts. Among his students was the young Auguste Renoir, who one day brought with him to the drawing course one of his painted sketches. Signor eyed the study with evident irritation and then snapped at the young painter: “TAKE CARE NOT TO BECOME ANOTHER DE-LACROIX!”

Notes
I should like to record here my gratitude to Pierre Rosenberg and Jacques Foucart at the Louvre and to Madame Bouleau-Rabaud, the warm and hospitable librarian at the École (who even knitted booties for our first child), for their unfailing courtesy and assistance during my research in Paris twenty years ago.


4 Boime (cited n. 2), p. 126.

5 I. Franchi Verney della Valetta, L’académie de France à Rome, Paris, 1904, p. 27.

6 Ibid., p. 155.

7 Rome, Archives de la Villa Medici. “Directoire de Savoir 1796–1807.” Carton I, “Pièces diverses 1777–1804.” This includes material on the transaction and exchange of the Villa Magnia for the Villa Medici. See the undated piece (c. February 1815): “Qui a plus de droit à faire valoir cette considération que l’Auguste Maison qui descend de Marie de Médicis? Quel plus noble usage peut-on faire de cette Villa que de la consacrer, comme l’a fait la France au culte des beaux-arts? Quel usage plus conforme à l’usage, aux goûts de Cosme et de Laurenti de Médicis? Cette Villa était une simple habitation; elle est maintenant une sorte de temple où tout le monde peut aller admirer et étudier les copies exactes des chefs d’oeuvres anciens et modernes.”


9 Boime (cited n. 2), p. 57.


12 Grunche, Grand Prix de Rome (cited n. 1), p. 79.


Albert Boime is Professor of Art History, University of California, Los Angeles.


Abstract Art in America Before Abstract Expressionism

Although the New York School of the 1940s and 1950s has received considerable attention, the abstract artists who are their immediate predecessors have been consistently undervalued. In most surveys of American art, abstract painting of the 1930s has been neglected for Social Realism, Regionalism, and American Scene images. Certain sculptors of this decade, notably David Smith and Alexander Calder, have fared better, but most American constructivists have been largely ignored. Therefore, Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927–1944, an exhibition organized by the Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, was a welcome reassessment of the generation that preceded the Abstract Expressionists. With works by forty-three artists and an impressive scholarly catalogue, this show was the most comprehensive study to date of American abstraction prior to 1945. There have been previous exhibitions devoted to avant-garde sculpture in America of this period1 and several shows that presented the followers of Mondrian,2 but the ambitious scope of this recent survey is unrivaled.

The period chosen for this exhibition of American abstraction begins in 1927 with the “Eggbeater” series of Stuart Davis and closes in 1944 with the death of Piet Mondrian in New York. According to the organizers, John R. Lane and Susan C. Larsen, the opening of Galletin’s Gallery of Living Art at New York University in 1927 marked the “revitalization” of abstraction in America. Since Mondrian’s final paintings of his New York years coincided with the emergence of Abstract Expressionism and the beginnings of international recognition for American artists, his death seemed an appropriate closure for the show.

The artists selected for Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America included the predictable assortment of founding members of the American Abstract Artists group,3 artists working for the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration, and American adherents to Neo-Plasticism, with some overlaps. There were early works by artists later associated with the New York School: Willem de Kooning and Arshile Gorky. Important teachers of the period were included—Jan Matulka, Hans Hofmann, and Vaclav Vytlacil—as well as independent artists who were not associated with any particular organization or artist group—Charles Biederman, Theodore Roszak, and Isamu Noguchi. There were some provocative surprises: for example, Raymond Jonson, the sole representative here of the Transcendental artists, was active with the other nine members of that group in the Southwest during the 1930s and 1940s.

This show, described by John Lane as “the first full-scale study of this important aspect of art in the United States,”4 delivered most of what was claimed for it. There were outstanding examples by artists who attempted an American variant on international developments in abstraction. Some, like Jan Matulka and John Graham, remained close to the Cubist tradition, whereas others, including Fritz Glarner, Burgoine Dillar (Fig. 1), and Harry Holtzman, adhered to the orthodoxy of de Stijl. Many artists fluctuated between the biomorphic abstractions of Joan Miró and Jean Arp and the reductive geometry of Mondrian. This is true of Alexander Calder, for example, who favored spheres and rectangles in his early constructions such as The Pisto of 1931 but derived other works from the 1930s from Arp and Miró. By the 1940s, however, the polychrome Constellations in wood are closely related to a series of paintings by Miró with the same title. Ibram Lassaw experimented with the abstract surrealism of Alberto Giacometti in Sculpture in Steel, 1938, and turned to a geometric severity in Intersecting Rectangles of 1940.