Painted pomp

by

Albert Boime
The term art pompier marks a powerful current in both art historical writing and art market strategy, the combination of which often leads to the idea of a movement. This trend has been conspicuous for nearly twenty years, but is now crowned by the opening in Paris of the new Musée d’Orsay in December 1986. The Musée d’Orsay devotes equal time and space to both academic and avant-garde artists of the nineteenth century and thus provides a wider perception of the period. This development has already given rise to such facile labels as “The Other Nineteenth Century” or “The New Nineteenth Century,” suggesting that the insertion of academic and official painting into mainstream history is somehow a “rediscovery” of lost works. In fact, they were never lost but merely languishing in storage in major museums around the world, whose curators were embarrassed to display them with modernist objects. Thus the opening of the Musée d’Orsay would seem to represent the revenge of the “pompiers,” so long maligned during the first half of the twentieth century. Modernist ideals had done much to devalue and discredit the historical contribution of art academies and their representatives. The promiscuous use of the term “academic” and its almost constant negative implications have made us forget that every major artist of the modern era attended some form of art academy. It is now clear that the downgrading of the academy relates to a shift of allegiance of the dominant social elite (making an economic transition from an entrepreneurial to a corporate mentality) to the avant-garde, corresponding to the celebration of innovation in a technological world. Social and cultural prestige depended on owning “the latest thing.” But the mood of collectors in the 1970s was eclectic, conservationist, and nostalgic, and the notion of “progress” — now disparaged by Vietnam, nuclear risk, atmospheric pollution, and the dumping of toxic wastes into rivers and soil — began to carry the same onerous burden formerly assumed by “academic.”

The popularity of the pompier went on unabated into the 1980s, with collectors trying to balance their lives in an age of high-tech by surrounding themselves with the semblance of old-fashioned ethics and crafts. Japanese and Arab collectors (the latter buying works by orientalists like Gérôme and Fromentin) entered the market, seeking a cultural riposte to electronic fantasies and microchip wonders in corporate executive spaces. In America this nostalgia for heroic images of the past and for traditional social patterns has produced McDonald’s yellow arches and Colonel Sanders’s goateed countenance. The digitalized instruments, the faceless buildings of steel, concrete, and glass, have given rise to the “post-modernist” reaction that calls for more variation of form and ornamentation and a new sensitivity to materials. The greater expense required to recover these qualities insures the owners of newfound status.

This reaction is based on nostalgia for a lost system of individual heroism and old-fashioned values. The rise in the United States of the “yuppie” (Young Urban Professional) taste manifests itself in the demand for wooden dashboards in automobiles to replace plastic and fiber glass materials, as well as for exotic gourmet meals that reject processed foods and incorporate rare and specialized ingredients. The ascendance of abstract expressionism and the shift of the main center of the avant-garde from Paris to New York is closely related to the revival of the pompiers. The self-conscious rhetoric of avant-garde

**Setting the world on fire**

by

Albert Boime

After the downgrading of all things “academic” by incendiary critics during the first half of this century, pompier art has risen like a phoenix from the ashes of the academy to confront a new society. Characterized by languid, naked maidens in pseudo-classical surroundings, the excessive “camp” representations of the pompiers fit the bill for a new generation of middle-class collectors. The Musée d’Orsay opens with a collection of paintings, sculpture, furniture, and photographs from 1848 to 1914, reestablishing pompier art and inviting a rediscovery of nineteenth-century academic painting.
critics began to constitute an academic dogma of its own, and the avant-garde impulse inevitably congealed into a rigid platform. During the 1950s and 1960s, culture was subjected to the hegemony of the abstract avant-garde. Its defenders posited an abrupt transition of almost catastrophic change between the old and the new, between tradition and innovation. Their attempt to expunge from the historical record the contribution of the academic masters succeeded to such an extent that few art historical accounts of the period—whether broad surveys or more specialized studies—gave more than passing notice to the unfortunate “non-persons.” The whole period was steeped in the rhetoric of the triumphant avant-garde, which justified the current dynamics of the art market and the supremacy of the New York School. It heralded itself as the successor to the Parisian avant-garde and even absorbed the nineteenth-century polemic against academicism, analogous to the U.S. government assuming the burden of the French in Indo-China after 1954.

The modernist movement placed itself in opposition to the stereotyped formulas of academicism in order to represent the “spirit of the age.” The whole machine age took on heroic proportions by contrast to ornamentalism, eclecticism, and the pattern-making of the academic tradition. Modernism needed a highly visible enemy, and every modern principle seems to have been framed with its negative counterpart in mind. The polemics of modernism fed on an anti-academic discourse, and when it totally demolished the academic ideal it had nothing but itself to assert, and its own emptiness and shallow formula was revealed. But the myth continued to be successful for a time, blocking all attempts to study academy art objectively and thus obscuring the origins of modernism itself. This refutation of an institution that no longer existed as an effective instrument of cultural production was bound to arouse suspicion. The avant-garde could not maintain itself solely by exploiting the previous momentum of the School of Paris. The emergence of pop art, with its meticulous regard for detail and polished surfaces reminiscent of academy art, also challenged the avant-garde dogma which fetished the appearance of “process” and spontaneity. Thus the 1960s witnessed the beginning of the end of the avant-garde tradition, and it is wholly unsurprising that it was in the United States that the academic revival occurred. In 1967 Art News published its annual on “The Academy” with important articles by Thomas Hess, Robert Rosenblum, Thérèse Burollet, Gerald M. Ackerman, and Salvador Dalí, a notable event paradoxically made possible by the journalistic champion of abstract expressionism.

J.-P. Crespelle’s highly informative book of 1966, Les maîtres de la belle époque, had already foreshadowed the academic revival. Twenty years earlier the American painter R. H. Ives Gammell called attention to the great tradition of the Académie des Beaux Arts and the need to revive its workshop methods. He grouped all avant-garde trends—cubism, symbolism, and surrealism—under the general category of impressionism and characterized “modern painting” as a symptom of the profound spiritual disruption leading to World War II. Since the book was written on the eve of Nagasaki and Hiroshima he could not have foreseen the catastrophic post-war tensions. But he lucidly articulated many of the central contradictions of avant-garde painting and advocated a return to the standards of the Académie des
Beaux Arts as a way to rebuild post-war culture. Building on the precedent of Gammell, I pursued my studies of the Académie in the mid-1960s and set out the scholarly perimeters for a historical legitimation of its contribution to modern art. My work, The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century (1970), struck at the ideological roots of the mythical conflict between academy and avant-garde and revealed the logical progression between the academic tradition and the evolution of the moderns. It pointed out the profound ties between academicians and their independent disciples and demonstrated a natural connection between the informal preparatory art of the masters and the formal finished work of their modernist pupils. It disclosed that the downgrading of the Académie and its teachers was an ideological stance taken by apologists for the avant-garde. By exposing the wellsprings of the myth, the book restored to art scholarship the missing chapter that had been rudely excised from history.

The world of creativity (whatever its ultimate aims and sources) knows no concrete boundaries between high and low — boundaries previously determined by modernist critics not in terms of intrinsic quality but in terms of style and/or content. Nevertheless, the effort to eradicate the academicians had resulted in the staining of their entire edifice with the tarred brush of "badness." By definition, academic work came to mean "bad art" and avant-garde work "good art." There is no need to introduce specific examples of the two schools into the present discourse, but the patent absurdity of this general proposition would be grounds for endless mirth except that it is a notion still taken seriously by eminent critics, art historians, and museum curators. In the 1950s and 1960s style and gesture were cherished as the be-all and end-all of art production, indeed, as the justification for all cultural practice from prehistoric times to the present. Such an ahistorical attitude had the added advantage of granting the moderns a history-exempt status: through the categories of formalism their work could be viewed as "timeless," like old master productions. Only now the artists sprang fully equipped not from the head of the deity Originality but from the deity known as The Unconscious, a Freudian surrogate for the old divinity.

But artists do not work in a vacuum, and there is an inevitable link between the most original efforts and the historical contest. So much debasing of the academy aroused my suspicion; and like others of my generation spurred by the social and political protests of the 1960s, I questioned the common assumptions about academic art, just as they challenged the existing policies of the government and the university. In this sense, my interest in the academic tradition signified as much a questioning of the falsified view of history promulgated in the classroom and survey texts as it did a manifestation of a changing taste. My allegiance shifted from the modernists to the "underdog" academicians who were the target of so much irreverent abuse. As my research disclosed the continuity between the generations, between the academic tradition and avant-garde modernism, a missionary zeal overtook me in my desire to point out the historical links that had been consigned to oblivion by an ahistorical mind-set.

The book amplified the historical perspective of the nineteenth century to account for some of its most illustrious practitioners. It heightened scholarly awareness of the degree to which the early modernists were influenced by their masters. Few contemporary monographic studies of the avant-garde skip this relationship, as was the case two decades ago. Today art historians automatically incorporate into their texts the progressive exchange that took place between academic master and independent disciple. The modernists did not simply reject what came before, but borrowed freely from tradition those components that best answered to their aesthetic and ideological needs. They were not only part of the same process, but they also applied the academy techniques to their most advanced experiments.

There are still lingering ideas that have to be demystified in order that academicians may not be indiscriminately lumped in the category of "bad" artists. Further intensive historical investigation of the academic masters and a richer presentation of their works can help still the debate over their presumed bad qualities. As of now, the social historian of art and the informed apologist for the avant-garde can at least agree on the historical importance of the academicians, but the latter still wishes to insist on the superior quality of the modernists. In fact it may be as Gammell predicted, that by 2001 the avant-garde art celebrated in the 1950s and 1960s will be consigned to a lesser status than the art of Bouguereau, Gérôme, and Couture.
The co-existence of the two approaches appears on the surface as the product of the present age of personal synthesis, of an unprejudiced, pluralistic, complex, and contradictory world. No single system, mode of thought, or methodology seems to provide all the answers to the intricacies of everyday life, and it is incumbent upon individuals to determine for themselves their own set of values and beliefs. This diversity is manifested in contemporary culture; major art movements appear to be outdated and we are confronted with a profusion of styles, themes, and processes. At the same time, no single aesthetic philosophy dominates; on the contrary, a dazzling lineup of possibilities confuses the casual observer and even the seasoned veteran.

Some see this as an indication of the art world’s loss of direction and confidence, while others see it as a source of cultural richness and newfound strength. In one sense it is positive; the abundant options take the heat off artists, who need no longer be tyrannized by a predominant mode like abstraction. It also spells the end of the modernist ideal of a unified aesthetic program and purity of form. Basic to the modernist vision was the contradictory dream of individual freedom, the pursuit of a unique direction, and the cultivation of one’s own being within an absolutist category.

The challenge of the coming decade will not be the quest for originality or aesthetic novelty, but the establishment of a body of work that can communicate with an enlarged public and respond to a new perception of the audience. It will include simple handicraft methods to express and tell stories. Individual passions, cultural myths and ideology will be fabricated out of paint and canvas to narrate ideas and restore the foundation of personal faith in artmaking. At the same time, we must now guard against countering modernist myth by creating a new mythology of the academy and its affiliates, pompiereart. We need to establish the ontological bases of its program rather than simply reverse the ideological arguments modernism used. The academy itself offers fundamental philosophical arguments clarifying the lines of demarcation between academicism and avant-garde, realism and abstraction, craft and machine art, historical style and personal style. Without the idea of the academy none of this would be understandable, nor could we grasp the total relation of culture to the profound industrial, political, and social changes in the modern period and the drastic transformation of what it means to be an authentic person in the modern world.

The opening of the Musée d’Orsay and its apparent marriage of opposites seems to address this larger issue. The formerly antagonistic approaches converge on historical grounds and this unity helps us map out their progeny. But is this convergence of antagonists and alternatives historically valid, or does it simply reflect the pluralistic ideal of advanced industrial society, which absorbs the energies of competitive group interests and makes them virtually indistinguishable? Just as conflicts in the political realm are modified and arbitraged under the double impact of technological progress and international communism, so now aesthetic conflicts are attenuated in the name of unbiased scholarship and the voracious appetite of the market. Mobilized against the threat from without, capitalist society shows an internal union and cohesion unprecedented in its earlier stages. This cohesion operates in the aesthetic realm as a ready tolerance for revisionist approaches without examining the historical situation from the standpoint of the class struggle. If the exhibitions at the Musée d’Orsay promote a class analysis, this will enable us to make a genuine evaluation of their relationship to the total society.

An understanding of the revival of the pompier requires some analysis of the taste for “camp”—the elite’s term in the 1960s for the absorption of mass culture into high art. Camp, signifying a form of artificialized nature, embraced the pompiers because of their seriousness of intent that fell flat on its face. The extravagant compositions of Bouguereau, Sartorio, and Böcklin contain a playful element, but it is play carried to outlandish extremes. Their excessiveness constitutes their modernism, an exaggeration and elaboration of conventional academic practice that distinguishes their work from so many of their peers. They did not produce “passionate failures” in Susan Sontag’s sense of camp, but were confident enough not to take their life’s work too seriously. They knew they had to make concessions to satisfy the market and this meant breaking in part with orthodox precedent.

Simultaneously, this tongue-in-cheek attitude to their work and academic affiliation denigrated their professional and personal ego. They could no longer take themselves seriously because the platform on which they based their aesthetics had been totally discredited. In a sense, pompiereart fit easily into fin-de-siècle decadence since its representatives relished playing with the degraded forms of their masters.

The current interest in such Bouguereau subjects as Madonna, mother and cloyingly adorable children, stems from the elevation of camp into a solid aesthetic category.
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Rejecting traditional family values and religious orthodoxy, the new generation of middle-class collectors can use for their private code and badge of prestige these images of an antiquated system of ethical, moral, and institutional values. Their position is enhanced in a society accustomed to Reagan’s rhetoric, which manipulates symbols closely related to those of the nineteenth-century pompiers. The more liberal yuppies can thus safely advertise both their mild dissent from Reaganism and their mod position on sexuality and family by the campy representations of the pompiers.

This position actually allows for the harmonious marriage of pompiers and impressionists at the Musée d’Orsay. While impressionism may have had a subversive significance in 1874, impressionist painting now (as demonstrated by its widespread popularity) conjures up a life-style like A Sunday in the Country or even Club Med. Californians, for example, see their own ideals of outdoor relaxation and hygienic living mirrored in impressionist scenes. Impressionism appears as a celebration of the yuppie life-style, the overt and affirmative side of its personal taste and ideology. Hence the revival of the pompiers coincides with the absorption of impressionism into mass culture. Both ratify the taste of a growing group of collectors no longer guided by avant-garde aesthetics, who assert this choice without benefit of expertise. This is the real significance of the opening of the Musée d’Orsay and its “new” nineteenth-century synthesis.

It is a combination that suggests the idea of change but does little to negate the existing order of things. Nineteenth-century art has now entered the arsenal of bourgeois ideology in a form analogous to the “retentive” stage of corporate advertising. Certain brands and their logos become so well known through media saturation that they can be displayed in fragmented form and still be recognizable by the spectator conditioned by their stylistic and formal peculiarities. Similarly, pompiers and impressionists confer instant status through their recognizability factor.

The new cultural synthesis no longer depends on the close-knit circle of connoisseur, museum curator, and scholar that marked the earlier collectors. The pompiers and impressionists appeal for the very reason that they appear as self-explanatory icons of the bourgeois collector. The shrinking institutional base coincides with the new generation of collectors who do not have the wealth of Isabella Stewart Gardner, J. P. Morgan, Nelson Rockefeller, or Charles Wrightsman and in fact assert their taste over and against this older generation. While the members of this older elite dominated the cultural market they celebrated progressive features of originality and individuality that they cherished as emblems of capitalist ideals. (This is still a factor in the corporate underwriting of “blockbuster” shows, which is invariably justified by its promotion of “innovation” and “quality.”) This privileged minority wanted to demonstrate that the world they envisaged was not moribund and ossified but capable of producing a culture equal to that of the past and on a par with contemporary technological superiority.

Today’s novel feature is the flattening out of the antagonism between culture and social reality through the obliteration of the oppositional and alien elements in “high” culture. The eradication of this culture takes place not through the rejection of “cultural values,” but through their wholesale incorporation into the established order, through their widespread reproduction and display. The consumer culture and its dispersion through mass communications has made every expression in art, politics, religion, and philosophy a rehearsal for a sweepstakes campaign. Each takes on a meaning only in the context of salesmanship, propaganda, and leisure time pursuits. Late industrial society has succeeded in materializing previous romantic ideals and reifying the objects of the imagination. Here high culture and popular culture converge to become the material culture.

Thus impressionism and pompiers are no longer confront each other as antagonists (the seminal show of 1974 at Hofstra University was named “Art Pompier: Anti-Impressionism”), but unite in affirmation of an established order that sells culture in a post-modernist discount house. Neither refutes the existing order but furnishes contentment in the kitchen, the corridor, and the office. Total commercialization has joined the formerly antagonistic aesthetic approaches, and this union expresses itself in the umbrella concept of “The New Nineteenth Century” — something akin to pouring new wine into old bottles.

The meaning of the term “pompiers” is shrouded in ambiguity, and has recently been complicated by the generalizing of the concept to refer to almost all late nineteenth-century painting of the non-progressive or academic sort. Like most successful labels it works because it embraces a rich array of interrelated meanings.

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Todd Brocklin, Naiads at Play, detail, 1886.
Oil on canvas: 151 x 176 cm (59.4 x 69.3 in.).
Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Kunstmuseum, Basel.
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Originally, the name was held to be derived from die-hard neoclassicists whose Roman and Greek heroes wore helmets resembling the brass helmets of French firemen known as “pompiers” — that is those who work the water pumps. It was derisively coined by the enemies of the Académie, perhaps out of revenge for the nasty label of “impressionism.”

This is the most popular definition, but there are several other nuances which are relevant to an understanding of the word. The pompiers was also the manufacturer of pompes, which in French means both pump and pomp, the almost universal term for ostentation and exaggerated display. In this sense, the pompiers was someone who fabricated stately compositions not unlike the earlier makers of “grand machines.” Littré’s 1885 edition of the Dictionnaire de la langue française also defines pompiers as a joinerman tailor who “finished” the seven garment produced by the master tailor. Since the “fini” was a fundamental concept of academicians, who used their thick hog’s-hair brushes known as blaireaux to “touch up” and smooth out the surface, it would have been an apt designation for them.

Littré, however, does not yet list pompiers as a group label although it is certain that the term was in general use by the 1880s. Evidently it still smacked too much of studio argot to constitute a legitimate term for his lexicon. The eighth edition of the Dictionnaire de l’Académie française, however, did list it as a term used ironically to characterize an outdated literary or artistic style, hence the descriptive phrase “le style pompiers.” This definition related to long-standing expressions such as “une vaine pompe,” or “le pompe de son style,” referring back to the idea of vain ostentation and pretentiousness.

Hence the pejorative significance of the term is closely related to “pompousness” and self-conscious solemnity.

The connection of painter-pompiers to French firemen contains still another nuance deriving from the organization of the sapeurs-pompiers (fire brigades). These brigades (which at one time were attached to the military) formed an army-like corps led by a commandant des pompiers and when in action, their regimented conduct and uniforms conveyed the impression of a battlefield operation. Hence, for their critics the painter-pompiers constituted a corps united by common goals, and this was reinforced by the consolidation of their ranks. Gérôme retorted to one attack: “Il est plus facile d’être incendiaire que pompiers.”

Pompiers had to meet certain criteria before meriting the label, and the tendency to group indiscriminately all late academic or non-avant-garde painters under this rubric distorts its original meaning. These criteria touched upon content, technique, style, and expressive form. The pompiers was one who used a traditional classic, allegorical, or religious subject; worked methodically in an academic-classical technique; generally painted on a large scale; and stretched the limits of tradition by using for strategy excessive action and characterization, photographic realism, and outlandish sentiment. Pompiers differed from their more orthodox confrères through their valiant attempt to rescue the grand tradition by infusing it with a dose of contemporary life and melodrama. The violence and extravagance of their scenes represents both a devaluation of the classical-academic tradition and an acknowledgment of the actual dynamic changes. The irrational component of works like Bouguereau’s Orestes Pursued by the Furies and Morelli’s Temptation of St. Anthony springs from social and political upheaval in the second half of the century. This attempt to give their works the feel of modernity through wild enthusiasm and prodigious scale or action made them more experimental than their colleagues, and in a very real sense they perceived themselves as mediating between the forms and content of the tradition and the modernistic experiments of the avant-garde. Degas, referring to Albert Besnard’s use of impressionistic color, called him “un pompiers qui a pris feu” (a fireman who has caught fire). The original pompiers, like the painters of camp in a later period, took themselves less seriously than did the avant-garde. They played at their easels, often minimizing their classical trappings and barely suggesting tradition through stereotyped elements in an ambiguous landscape setting. Their nudes in a twilight forest scene hardly conceal the atmosphere of the Paris studio and the naiads cavorting in an ocean could well be displaying themselves at the beach of Trouville or at La Grenouillère, the famous swimming resort that was frequented by the impressionists.

Thus pompiers are historically significant for their attestation to the degeneration of academic-classical conviction and confidence in the face of historical change and avant-garde opposition. They tacitly approved the modernists’ attempt to inject the declining art with an energy derived from contemporary experience. The results are often excessively violent.

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Louis Antoine Léon Riesener, Leda, detail, 1840. Oil on canvas, 110 x 154 cm (43.3 x 60.6 in.). Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen.
pornographic, and downright ridiculous, but at all times yield a rich insight into bourgeois taste and anxieties in the second half of the century. The pompiers lost their appeal when they were usurped by the cinema, but ironically were revived in the era of television. Television consummated the commercialization of high art and transmuted it into mass culture. The need for sensation and shock effects rather than plots and stories to hold audiences gave rise to excesses not unlike those of the pompiers. There is a close connection between modern advertising and pomnier art; a similar incongruity of space and time, and exaggerated bodily posture and facial expression may be found in advertisements contemporary with late nineteenth-century salon painting. The crassness of so much pomnier art and its obvious celebration of the consumer-oriented bourgeois life-style made it a forerunner of "The Pepsi Generation."
The pompiers further anticipated television's sexism and exploitation of women, designed to reduce women to consumers and objects for consumers. Pomnier painting was generally anti-feminist in its manipulation and objectification of the female body. Often the classical trappings were no more than a pretext for a misogynistic viewpoint. Bram Dijkstra, in Idols of Perversity (Oxford University Press), shows that this hostility to feminism differed from traditional treatment of women in art by its greater psychological and anthropological sophistication. New theories of evolution and psychology provided the painters with pseudo-scientific insights into the role of women in modern society, and the ever-increasing threat of women's emancipation fueled their activity. The imperialism and racism of the late nineteenth century regularly enters into pomnier imagery and is often linked with virile adventurism and anti-feminism. Here pomnier modernism was predicated on the excesses of global investment and colonial expansion, the dark side of the Belle Epoque.

Such perverse conjunctions of racism and sexism are seen in Garnier's L'épave (The Shipwreck) and Debat-Ponsan's The Massage: Harem Scene. In the first a nude woman with a curiously ironic and enervated expression is shown lying helplessly on her back, impossibly arched so as to render her totally immobile. She is part of the flotsam and jetsam (to which the title alludes) thrown up upon the shore of some remote exotic country. While she gazes at the spectator and exposes her body on the frontal plane, two black natives of the country wearing fanciful headdresses and necklaces of shark teeth come upon her and gape open-mouthed at the sight. A contemporary critic noted that the woman-debris is just coming to after the storm has thrown her upon the beach, and "two great devils of savages, negroes with feathers in their hair and pins in their noses, slide toward her and contemplate her with an air of both astonishment and fascination." Their black skin contrasts with her "milky skin," and her huge "blonde wig" seems to merge with the rocky coastline. There is a three-way play involving the woman, the spectator, and the indigenous people, with the woman exposing herself to the gaze of the beholder, and to the islanders approaching her from behind.

The solution to this enigmatic work lies in the spread of Darwinian theory in the 1870s. It not only provided justification for colonizing "inferior" peoples — i.e., peoples presumed to be in an early stage of the evolutionary process, but also suggested that
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tap suggest less a harem scene than the modern salle de bain of a sumptuous bourgeois townhouse. By the 1880s the Near Eastern scenes of harems, slaves, and baths had become clichés, sexual titillation for tired businessmen in the transparent guise of high art. Yet this imagery continued unabated through the rest of the century, mainly in response to the threat of feminism and the compartmentalized domestic role assigned to women in the late Victorian era. The odalisques and other Near Eastern types epitomized female submission: Earl Shin (a student of Gérôme turned critic) described Cormon’s Sitâ as a woman “contented in the imprisonment of her restricted existence... Sitâ’s pretty ripe-lipped profile is agitated by no desires for education, no aspirations after women’s rights: to be a good judge of the coffee she pours out is the boundary of her desire for knowledge.” Ironically, while Westerners were quick to condemn the harem as a corrupt Muslim institution, it provided a ready contest for salon painters to imagine the Western domestic stereotype. The female in the painted harem is Europeanized, while the black attendant or slave is shown to be “colonized.” Both testify to the power of Western European males. The sense of submission and female passivity is evident both in the flattened position of the white woman and her slack limbs and in the resigned attitude of the black attendant who works her mistress’s left arm with a tired hand. They are integral components in the hierarchy based on gender, class, and race exploitation. The harem, although publicly attacked, was for the salon-goer a paradigm of the European will-to-power. Since it was well known that real harems were off-limits to all males except their owners, the salon images suggested a violation of privacy, thus reinforcing the aggressive position of the male beholder and adding to their erotic appeal.

Pompier made the female image the agent of their eccentric version of the academic–classic tradition. In this they accepted the common theme in late nineteenth-century bourgeois culture of the woman as a key source of social degeneration and the loss of heroism. She embodied the potential forces of decadence and thus the upheavals in actuality resulted from the male’s submission and yielding up of his spiritual and intellectual qualities. One of the most electrifying images in art of the theme of female destructiveness is Sartorio’s Diana of Ephesus and Her Slaves, a terrifying projection of the all-consuming goddess. Sartorio portrays her as the multiple-breasted fertility idol, feeding, to excess, her children as well as the monstrous creatures of their worst nightmares and then leaving them as an exhausted heap of wasted beings. A friend of D’Annunzio, Sartorio shared his misogyny and pushed it to extremes in his major pictures of the 1890s, The Gorgon and the Heroes and the Diana of Ephesus. In both cases, the main female protagonist is identified with wild animals, serpents, and hybrid beasts. It is her animal nature, eager to mate and play with woodland creatures, that reveals woman’s true nature and incapacity for spiritual growth.

Darwin himself suggested that the presence in some women of multiple breasts implied a link with our primal ancestors, thus providing “scientific” evidence for the fin-de-siècle treatment of women as inherently animal-like. This female proximity to behemoths and leviathans is a commonplace in pompier art. Riesser’s Leda and Bacchante Playing with a Tiger are early examples of this tendency; the portrayal of Leda greatly appealed to the erotic imagination of the nineteenth-century male for obvious reasons. The extended neck of the swan was highly suggestive, and at the same time it could be intricately integrated into elegant compositional designs and pass for a “classical” work. The bacchante, as the intoxicated, sex-starved creature of antiquity, appeared with monotonous regularity in pompier painting, and was often interchanged with woodland nymphs. When suggestively juxtaposed with bestial creatures, the salon audience would not have missed the point. The wild abandon of women in pompier works like Bouguereau’s Nymphs and Satyr, Böcklin’s Naiads at Play, and Smither’s Race of Maenads and Tritons all point to women with uncontrollable sexual desires and atavistic animal instincts. Nothing, of course, could have been more convenient for the sex-starved male (whose wives, sisters, and daughters were confined to a hothouse world of tortured modesty and virtue), who could not be faulted for being seduced by an insatiable bacchante or nymph. It is no coincidence that just about the time the pompier began depicting their eccentric images of frenzied females the term “nymphomania” entered the lexicon of the drawing-room and barroom conversation.

Even Cabanel’s Nymph Kidnapped by a Faun, which purports to show a struggle, hardly camouflages its true message. The nymph offers minimal resistance and is shown swooning in the faun’s embrace, while exposing her body seductively to the viewer as if to demonstrate compliance. The faun, half-animal, half-human creature, exerts no force in his conquest and even gently caresses his so-called

Facing page
Arnold Böcklin, Death of Cleopatra, 1878. Oil on canvas; 76 x 61.5 cm (29.9 x 24.2 in.). Offentliche Kunstsammlung Kunstmuseum, Basel.
"Abductee." The atavistic hybrid creature, still frozen in the evolutionary chain, and the sensual naked woman join forces as the primordial fantasy of the bourgeois world. The image graphically portrays what bourgeois man has lost in civilizing himself and nature, and at the same time what he must do to recover his primal self. Not surprisingly, it was Napoleon III — a major collector of pommier pictures — who bought Cabanel’s painting.

Morelli’s Temptation of St. Anthony — a favorite subject of the pommiers of all countries who needed at least one religious theme for their repertoire — is a case study of the power of women to lure males away from their intellectual and spiritual commitment. While the images of the smiling women appearing from beneath the crude mats of plaitored reeds and the rocks of the cave verge on the burlesque, there is nothing humorous about the agony that wracks the body of the tormented hermit. It is the striking contrast between the saint’s suffocation and the playful women that marks the pommier sensibility, but there is no mistaking the real gender differentiation that Morelli tries to illustrate. Earthbound woman was bent on bringing the hermit down from his spiritual heights.

Tamer pommier examples such as Gleyre’s La Charmeuse and Leighton’s Bath of Psyche are subtler versions of the same theme. The lone figure in each displays her naked body in a private sanctuary — supposedly off-limits to the prying eyes of male observers. The enchanting double-flute player gets high marks from the leering statue in the shadows, while Psyche’s behavior indicates that she is fully aware of being observed. In both cases the painter disports the nude female in apparent seclusion, inviting an invasion of privacy. Only the scarcest of classical accessories are included to permit voyeurism with composure. Gleyre’s own comments about the “virginal” type he posed points to his own private fantasies: for him a woman already twenty was in a state of decrepitude and past that age “woman no longer existed for the artist.” It is fascinating to see how many confirmed bachelors among the pommiers such as Gleyre, Moreau, and Leighton and even among independents like Degas had to literally “sneak up” on women to paint them in their “ideal” state. At other times, they reverted to their frenzied bacchantes and enslaving Omphales. This wildly vacillating swing from feminine virtue to feminine malevolence answered to the taste, and intellectual and emotional needs of bourgeois audiences. It belongs historically to a specific epoch, approximately from the time of the Second Empire to World War I. This was mainly a boom era, propelled by imperialist ventures and industrial and commercial expansion. The pommiers’ coherent set of pictorial components would not have been possible without the powerful backing of their bourgeois patrons. The eccentric and sometimes almost absurd application of the academic-classic package to their sensational images was tailored to the overeager entrepreneur and professional who had no patience with abstruse or erudite themes. By couching images of a shocking and sensational type in a classical setting, the pommiers managed to sustain the look of high art while providing entertainment for their clients. Strictly speaking, their works cannot be defined as either insipid potboilers or exquisite masterpieces. Rather, they mediated between the “high” and “low” art of the period and were thus open to assimilation into mass culture.

Pompiers depended upon the exploitation of female imagery to make their ideological point. A random selection of pommier pictures shows that such imagery was statistically numerous at the annual salons and clearly did popular appeal. The calculus of these themes delineates a bourgeois realm pervaded by anxiety about the role of women in the changing society. Problems of colonialism, racism, religion, education — of all social and political institutions — could be subsumed under the feminist issue. This would indicate that the threat of a feminist power base to the sexual hierarchy was as great as the threat of the labor movement to the capitalist hierarchy. The pompiers themselves threatened in their professional and creative lives by a growing band of independents, focused on depictions of women as the source of social and political decadence. It is no wonder that these depictions often seem to border on fixation and male hysteria.

Albert Boime

Opening of the Musée d'Orsay

Musée d’Orsay
L. rue de Bellechasse, Paris
From December 9
Hours: 9-6, Th 9-9:45
Closed: Monday

Project executed by Etablissement Public d'Orsay and directed by Jacques Rigaud and Jean Jenger

Museum director: François Cachin
Architecture by Renaud Bardon, Pierre Colbec, Jean-Paul Philippon

Interior design by Gae Aulenti
Collection designs by Michel Lachète
Catalogue by Michel Lachète and François Cachin
and published by the Réunion des Musées Nationaux