The vivid aesthetic qualities of modernity and spontaneity associated with the sketch should not deflect us from perceiving it as part of a larger configuration of social and political signification. I assume that in any work of art, representational or abstract, thematic or devoid of theme, every constituent element is charged with some narrative and, hence, political intention. While at this stage it is probably not possible to discover meaning in the brush gestures making up the sketch, the sketch itself will come to be seen as a kind of aerial photograph to be matched with others in a series to designate a panoramic visual space. In principle, artists don’t make their first, preliminary sketches with the definitive picture in mind because this cannot yet be conceptualized. The sketch stands alone in its expression of a mental effort to flesh out a synaptic message delivered by the brain; it is analogous to a linguistic utterance that can be understood only in relation to every other part of the language system. Both synchronically and diachronically, the sketch functions as basic to the ordered whole and as part of the work’s historical unfolding.

So far, no psychological or technical explanation of manual traces left by the brush has dealt with the problem of meaning, rather, these explanations seem to boil down to a reflexive function referring back to picture-making. For the semioticist, these micro units of pictorial composition function below the level of convention and cannot be read as part of a sign system. In trying to locate meaning in small units of picture-making, it is possible that we may run into similar problems of the pioneer atomic theorists seeking some irreducible particle of matter. We may find that it narrows down to pure energy. Nevertheless, the vast compendium of technical problems and their solutions—the studio recipes, the use of models, systems of perspective, modeling, shading, composition, and color—in short, everything the apprentice had been trained to do in the atelier, originally sprang from, and remained subject to, the dominant political, cultural, and economic ideologies within the social formation. The movement of the brush was surely a private affair, but as a voluntary movement it was subsumed under the general pedagogical system. Like handwriting and doodling, it crystallized the juncture between one’s training and one’s psychobiological makeup. Furthermore, now that every gesture can be digitalized and the rawest squiggle is accessible to computerized analysis, even spontaneity may be locked into a mathematical grid and subject to refutation.

The art historian Richard Shiff has discerned a fundamental paradox in my previous writing on the sketch. I wrote that the independents shifted their locus of interest from the executive to the generative phase of painting and systematized their sketching procedures. The operative word here is systematized since academic as well as independent theorists and critics had always described sketching as something beyond the ken of the curriculum, related almost to biology. How could there be a code for something spontaneous and revelatory? If indeed, as Shiff points out, sketching itself aided the artist in systematizing the generative process, this process would be ultimately self-defeating. However, what I was referring to was something closer to Seurat’s grid of points and later Monet’s comma-like gesture. In these two cases, the act of painting was facilitated by a mechanical movement that aimed at delineating a composition already preformed in nature and commodified as a motif. The imaginative idea of self-discovery was not at issue here, but rather the finding of the simplest and most expeditious method for rendering a picture already visualized in nature. In this sense, the sketches of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and academic practice generally, anticipated their mature work. This practice represented less an attempt to be spontaneous than an attempt to facilitate rapid execution. Sincerity depended less on the response of the hand to the sensation but to the idea of the motif prefigured instantly in the mind of the artist. Although this motif may have been new and fresh, its discovery and its figuration occurred simultaneously.

The Ecole’s students invented their compositions while the independents found them. You either invented or found your ideas for sketches. All sketches have one characteristic in common, their unfinished quality, usually indicated by freely handled and loosely defined brushwork. Hence, both the invented and the found motifs are reduced to similar networks of pigment, but the act of inventing allows for a more rational technique. The brushwork of invention involves elements of spontaneity, but its compositional organization, its fitting of part to part, does not. In this sense, I would say that the concept of spontaneity is problematic as a way of characterizing sketches and totally irrelevant to a discussion of the Ecole examples. It’s like knowing how to write: the gestural act of writing can be more or less spontaneous, but in the end it is derived from certain standard styles of letter formations that have evolved over time. Since a sketch presupposes indoctrination in a studio system and a background of experience, presumably the signature or individual brush technique has been grounded previously in conventional atelier practice.

This would mean that the notion of a spontaneous brush character corresponding to something occurring in the imagination has been fictionalized to account for degrees of finish. Jackson Pollock, for example, claimed he had no need of preliminary sketches or developing “color sketches into a final painting.” What he did was simply eliminate one stage in the conventional process for what he termed “the more immediate, the more direct ... statement.” What would this direct statement refer to? Presumably, a heighted state of mind that generated work activity but that no longer required prefigured composition or motif. Yet even here his moves were dictated by each previous gesture in the process, moves modified and qualified by his indoctrination in the art of the past and his training under Thomas Hart Benton.

The most cursory examination of the sketches of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts shows a marked degree of similarity and demonstrates the existence of conventions for sketching. Meant to be self-contained exercises, these sketches were executed in the same dimensions, painted within the same time constraints, and they all wound up looking remarkably alike. They often reveal a brush movement tracing the outlines of the figures and the folds of the costume—moving vertically...
with standing human forms and horizontally in horizontal landscape features. The brush does not actually establish the forms from some arbitrary part of the canvas as we might expect in an improvised work, but follows the silhouetting of already established forms. This suggests that a formal system of sketching existed for expressing basic themes and hence for conveying conventional meanings. The sketching would then have been employed to designate a specific way of seeing and understanding the nature of reality. Thus we discover that the sketch and its attendant technical attributes belong to a whole schema of decorum and form part of a larger sign system and ideological configuration. A clear sketch etiquette was the trademark of the Ecole. It would seem that its method was an insignia of social status; while the Barbizon School lispèd in the vernacular, the Ecole spoke the language of privilege.

The existence of a transmittable system of sketching is seen in the case of the Ecole professor Henri Lehmann. In the work of some of his students we see a studio recipe known as the balayè technique, a sort of broom-swept gesture consisting of a kind of cross-hatching done with a thick brush. One example by a long-forgotten student named Alexandre Boiron, Moses Striking the Rock (1881), was executed in cris-crossed strokes revealing the bristle marks of the brush. This may be compared with examples of Lehmann’s most successful disciple, Georges Seurat, whose Barbizon-like motifs done after his departure from the Ecole in the early 1880s betray technical passages in common with the Boiron. This not only demonstrates that it was possible to encode a sketch technique, but that the sketching system was flexible enough to allow for the signification of a different level of social meaning. It was widely known that Seurat adopted academic methods to restore order to a disbelievable impressionist, and it is conceivable that he took over the Ecole’s language to aggrandize his humble subjects. Certainly here one can no longer speak of spontaneous gestures. Seurat, of course, was to develop his own conventional system of painting and finishing in his intricate system of dots. These dots function as direct brush gestures encoded into systematic pieces of a puzzle-picture. The resulting pictorial network can be read in reference to scientific and mechanical procedures of the time. Was this exceptional practice at the time? Probably not. Undoubtedly, we shall come to learn that all brushing and technical procedures have conventional components and therefore lend themselves to a deconstruction.

Since it is not yet possible to read the surface of sketches as a signifying code, we may still look for meaning in sketches in their reception at a given moment. A distinction may be made between the material artifact and its aesthetic aura, the immaterial analogue common to the consciousness of a collectivity. The sketch achieves its proper identity and clear-cut meaning in relation to the norms in the beholder’s consciousness. It thus changes in step with the permutations of prevailing cultural, political, and social views.

The layering of meaning or signification in a sketch is therefore inseparable from ideology; its very openness and looseness made it inevitable that sketches would participate in the world of social and political conflict. In moments of revolution sketches tend to be perceived, and overperceived, as statements in opposition to the status quo and in defense of change in the social order. In nineteenth-century France, revolution generally had its complement in new artistic shifts, and in each case these shifts were evaluated on the basis of their sketchlike structures. The French Revolutions of 1830, 1848, and the Paris Commune in 1871 were turning points in literature and art as well as in politics. Each time artists had to take sides and align themselves with progressive or reactionary tendencies. This alignment took form in art as a conflict between sketch and finished work—between a projected future possibility and the status quo.

This is not to claim that sketching was the exclusive province of the rebels; obviously conservatives as well as modernists practiced sketching consistent with traditional atelier practice. But a fundamental academic discourse on the sketch employed a set of expositions that articulated—in substance if not in name—a potentially revolutionary cultural ideology. Radicals easily appropriated the sketch discourse for their own ends. Leaving the conservatives no option except to seize upon it themselves as the target for attack. Painters who worked in a conservative and highly polished mode may also have been radical political thinkers, but they tended in their work to carry out the traditional dictates, namely, the repressing in the final project of those qualities of spontaneity and improvisation accentuated in the sketch process. Revolutionaries such as Blake and David who rejected the facility associated with the sketch did not reject the liberty it implied. They exploded the academic norms in other ways, however, by pushing traditional canons to the breaking point, eliminating stock compositions, and taking chances with the representation of the human body. Their quest for originality and innovation was nevertheless analogous to the sketch process; their awkwardnesses and radically disjunctive narrative presentations could be likened to the character of the sketch. Here it may be underlined that it is not solely technique and surface texture that determines the significance of the sketch.

Naturally, revolutionary activity of any kind is defined by its relationship to an existing power structure. The negation of a political system and its culture requires a sharply distinctive ideological formation. The courtly virtuosity of a Boucher was countered by the rigorous structuring of a David, while the calculated chiaroscuro of a Sir Joshua Reynolds was countered by the exalted and tightly defined forms of a Blake. Generally, it may be claimed that revolutionary periods promote originality—the key component of the sketch discourse.

On the other hand, painters who exulted in the unfinished character of their definitive works may have been unprogressive socially and politically. A case in point is Delacroix, who interests us here because his work tended to be interpreted in politically revolutionary terms despite his conservative disposition. The spirit of the July Days was passionate, eloquent, emotional, somewhat wild. The feelings of exaltation, spontaneity, enthusiasm, verve, audacity, and even the act of executing a definitive work freely were directly associated with the sketch. Delacroix’s legendary picture of Liberty Leading the People was not only lauded or condemned for its expression of upsurge and unconstrained character, but characterized frequently by critics on all sides of the political spectrum as an esquisse or ébauche.

Once the July Monarchy consolidated itself, however, the enthusiasm for the qualities of the sketch and its revolutionary associations diminished rapidly. This is seen in the outcome of a government-sponsored competition for three paintings to embody its political program and which were to be evaluated on the basis of a preliminary sketch.5 While the themes of the competition drew parallels between 1789 and 1830 and retold history to make Louis-Philippe’s usurpation the inevitable result of France’s political evolution, the government made a bow to liberalism in its semi-open competition and public appeal. But the controversy that the contest generated as a result of the sketches demonstrated the projected affiliation between revolution and sketch-like procedures. It may be stated generally that whenever the social order is threatened, paintings showing freedom from convention tend to be overperceived. The competition generated a good deal of controversy and was harshly attacked by conservatives. Just as the government felt menaced by workers who had fought on the barricades and protested the failure of government to fulfill its promises, so the established order of the art world was menaced by the importance attached to the sketch. The reviewer of the conservative Journal des artistes claimed that the innovators (meaning the Romantic School) took greatest advantage of the sketch competitions and openly rejected “rules of taste.” They were “a conspiring cabal, skilfully organized and permeating the newspapers and the administration, influential at the Salons and even at court; making up a chorus of exaggerated praise for all kinds of improvised work, pochades and ébauches, the sketch and the half-finished . . .”6 Here the critic labeled the innovators as a conspiratorial group analogous to the government’s denunciation of anarchists who, under the guise of “liberty,” threatened to overturn the gains of the new government.

The conservative Raoul-Rochette wrote a two-part article condemning the contest because they favored “the mediocre artist” who invariably excelled at making sketches “precisely because this is all he can do.” On this basis the government made its worst blunder, because “In opening the door indiscriminately to all comers and admitting every applicant on equal terms to one and the same career, you set them by the ears in the name of a misconceived equality.” This is the anxious voice of privilege feeling overwhelmed by the crowds in the street, the nervous warning of elitism threatened by the clarion call of democracy. Ironically, Delacroix’s entry for the subject of the Boissy d’Anglas, done in an antibloliberal mood, was refused on these very grounds.

The third and concluding contest called for an image of the govern-
ment standing up to sedition, to the unruly behaviour of the mob and took a swipe at the collective political action of the popular classes. He chose as his theme an incident that occurred on 20 May 1795 when angry insurgents exasperated by hunger, unemployment, and inflation invaded the National Convention and waved a pike capped by the head of the deputy Feraud threateningly in front of the provisional president of the Convention, Boissy d’Anglas. The program called for the artist to show Boissy d’Anglas facing the crowd bravely. This last competition actually took place at a tense time when the atmosphere was charged with frequent working-class demonstrations and strikes employing rhetoric and strategic demands remarkably similar to those proclaimed by the surging crowd in 1795.

The influential critic Déleuze of the Journal des débats—the Wall Street Journal of its day—was repulsed by Delacroix’s handling of the crowd: “Since there is no principal and sharply determined grouping to draw one’s gaze and help organize the thought, this confusing disposition of so many persons overstrains one’s attention.” What Déleuze had in mind was the sketch’s projection of the unrestrained crowd, as revealed in his opening paragraph:

Without calling them cowardly, it would be possible to find more than one member of the Chamber of Deputies for whom the view of the picture representing Boissy d’Anglas … might induce recurring nightmares … This menacing, furious crowd, killing even in the sacred enclosure of the deputies; this entire spectacle is too terrible, too hideous … to become the daily preoccupation of the attention of those of our compatriots to whom we entrust the defense of our rights and interests.8

Delacroix’s sketch captures the terrifying spectacle of the crowd pouring in like a tidal wave through the vast interior in the direction of the speaker’s rostrum. Yet his work differed from that of his rivals, who broke the crowd down into distinct groups and individuals; Delacroix’s fused the crowd into an undifferentiated mass. Delacroix’s mob does not reveal itself through hideous grimaces or menacing gestures, but through its capacity to function as a truly spontaneous, irrepressible mass. Whether intended or not, Delacroix’s sketch brought home, through the intrinsic attributes of the sketch process itself, this capacity of the laboring classes for liberating themselves, and reminded the government of the haunting heritage of its rise to power.

The July Monarchy more or less managed to suppress rebellion during the next eighteen years. But the mounting agitation of the underclasses for change at last succeeded in February 1848 in toppling the regime of Louis-Philippe and establishing the Second Republic. The rhetoric of the progressive left again focused on energy and enthusiasm as agents of change, transferring the qualities of the sketch from the closeted academic world to the popular domain. During the period between 1847-1848, Jules Michelet delivered a series of lectures at the Collège de France which were an eloquent restatement of the fervent faith in democracy that he had expressed in Le Peuple in 1846. These lectures proved to be a critical moment in this development. Michelet established from the outset that France needs is not only a political revolution, but “a revolution of the heart, a moral and religious transformation.” Michelet’s model is the moment of the First Revolution in 1792 when the country was declared in danger, and all eligible French males volunteered to go to the front and meet the Austrian and Prussian troops then marching on the French frontier.

The very month the Revolution of 1848 broke out, Michelet stated in his lecture: “One day we will need the great popular movement, in marking at the same time what artificial elements are interspersed in it, to reveal the spontaneous instinct of the people.” Michelet had previously proclaimed the greatness of the spontaneity of the crowd in his book Le peuple, first published in 1846. He forecast “the great inventive originalities” to emerge from the people, and he addressed the young and the workers to bring to France a “new warmth and energy to the body politic.” He took the artist’s inspiration as the paradigm for this popular movement. For Michelet a secret sympathy exists between genius and the uneducated peasantry. At that time, France desperately needed:

great originality of invention to get beyond the mediocrity in which of late the native character has been reduced. To remain one’s self is a great power, a chance of originality. The person born of the people should beware of stifling his instinct to join the bourgeois civil order.

In his interpretation, the civil order preserves itself by embracing the stifling, rigid character akin to the definitive picture ruled by strict regulation and convention. Michelet’s ascription of genius to the people is defined in terms reminiscent of the discourse associated with the sketch:

The privilege of genius is, that inspiration acts in it before reflection; its flame burns with a full light. In other people, everything emerges slowly and in succession: the interval sterilizes them. Genius, on the other hand, fills up the interval, joins both ends, and suppresses time—it is a lightning flash of eternity.

And in a note to this passage he adds: “How much it is to be regretted that men of genius efface the successive traces of their own creation! They seldom keep the series of ébauches which have prepared its way.”10

Michelet is concerned above all to seek the natural genius of the people; the popular instinct so like the impulsive rendering of the sketch. He admonishes the educated classes to draw near to the people to recover spontaneity, to become youthful again, to rejuvenate their worn-out mentalities. He wants individual originality to merge with a collective and national originality. For education, as he put it, “like every work of art, demands, before everything else, a simple, strong esquisse; no subtlety, no minutiae, nothing that presents any difficulty, or provokes objection.” His paradigm is the child: “By a grand salutary sound and lasting impression we must in this child found man, and create the life of the heart.” Michelet returned to his favorite historical paradigm, the enrollment of the volunteers, which recalled for him “the enthusiasm of ’92.” Thomas Couture, next to Daumier, Michelet’s favorite artist of the period, responded to his mentor’s appeal by producing a sketch steeped in Michelet’s rhetoric. A sympathetic critic of the new Republic claimed that the painter dipped his brush in a palette of the tricolors.

Couture’s Enrollment of the Volunteers launches the Second Republic and incarnates the politics of the sketch.11 The new Republican ideal is the subject not only of reflection and rationality but also of feeling. It must not be forgotten that the republican idea speedily won over people who were poor and uneducated, with spontaneous modes of behavior that could not be termed completely rational. The Republic gained the adherence of the masses through ardent and emotion. This is the source of vitality of the people as stated in Michelet and fleshed out in Couture’s sketch. Less than one month after the founding of the new Republic, the Ministry of the Interior opened a competition for an image of the symbolic figure of the French Republic.12 As in 1830, the judging of the contest would be done on the basis of painted sketches.

The competition did not have a happy result; before the final adjudication took place, the tragic unfoldment of the workers’ insurrection in June had cooled down much of the enthusiasm inspired by the revolution, so that by the end of the year even the moderates had been eliminated. Yet while the stated outcome of the contest pertained to aesthetic failure and weak ideas, in fact it was to a large degree biased by the qualities inherent in the sketch. The critics’ polemic involving the technical attributes as well as postures—for example, impulsive brushing and the vehement pose as against the calm pose, the opposition between the static and the dynamic—carried distinct political associations. The energetic Liberty represented nascent Liberty, still enthusiastic and vital. Danton’s revolutionary formula “L’audace, l’audace, toujours l’audace!” found its way into both the positive and negative criticism of the painted sketches of the Second Republic.

On the whole, the sketches exhibited during the last week of April 1848 intimated a high degree of political progressivism in their use of Phrygian bonnets and their energetic productions. One of Daumier’s well-known sketches was a finalist: it depicted the powerful Republic as a nurturing mother for the minds and bodies of its children. But the progressivism was immediately suspect to the moderates who took control following the elections of 23 April. The reaction came mainly from the right; the radical press is surprisingly mute on the subject, probably because it did not know how to manipulate the aesthetic concepts as effectively as its opponents. The reaction took the form of a tirade against a bewildering farrago of symbolic attributes, tactless personifications, and technically haphazard surfaces. It tried to show as in 1830-1831 that the Republic’s democratic, open competition attracted mainly mediocrities, that the idea of the progressive Republican
was an absurdity impossible to encode, and finally that the collection of ragtag stereotypes showed the creative impotence of republican culture. Thus, the republic’s opponents challenged the basic goals of the competition and by so doing, the very nature of the nascent Second Republic.

There is no question that the spontaneity, vitality, and improvisation of the sketch entries decisively influenced the response of the conservative critics. One English reviewer observed that, although some of the sketches were “the result of a few slashes of the brush, they startled by the brilliance or boldness of their expression.” Most of the hostile French critics, however, perceived the sketches as a hodgepodge of uniformed “grotesque” ideas unworthy of carrying through to the final stage. The critic for the moderate paper Le National attacked even the concept of the sketch trial as a viable means of discovering talent:

Testying by way of a sketch, by its extreme facility and inventiveness, attracts swarms of contestants, the charlatans, the apprentices, the amateurs, the entire mob of mediocrities and savages whose shameful outing we witnessed for the first time in the competitions of painting and sculpture for the symbolic figure of the Republic … This absurd license, under the pretext of equality, produced only the saddest of efforts. It debased the competition; it dishonored our tradition in public; it made it impossible to render any kind of clear, sober evaluation, to make any secure selection form among such a hodgepodge of works without name, embryos and ébauches in a welter of preliminary chaos which would have numbed the view and tried the patience of even the most knowledgeable and expert of juries.13

He understood the sketch as the most equivocal of artistic practices; to judge on its basis is to judge not that which is, but what shall be. It is to try and divine the picture in the canvas, and the statue in the block. Given these conditions, it was inevitable that the competition should miscarry.

While clearly the competitions projected a complex set of associations and historical connections, it is fascinating to read the criticism of the Republican concept itself which often made use of the sketch metaphor. For example Le Crédit wrote in connection with the competition for the coin designs that “the Republic, born only yesterday, is still an unformed seed, but a fertile seed beyond the power of humans to destroy.”14 The more conservative L’Illustration wrote in its review of the sketch trial that the first Revolution was an extraordinary thing, but what is its legacy?—“une seule esquisse, un simple trait d’un grand tableau projeté” (One solitary sketch, a simple outline of a projected masterwork). And it went on to elaborate:

The revolution of 1848 seems to herald the dawn of a new era, greater than ever before, in which the government of human society will be altering everything from top to bottom; but the immense results that it promises everyone are at this moment still in a state of vague hopes.15

The journal reiterated that the current government was still in a provisional state, an unformed and shapeless institution that could be realized and completed only through the efforts of the National Assembly. Here it expressly identified the radical regime with the confused and uncertain qualities of those sketches in the exhibition which projected the revolutionary attributes and audacious handling of its supporting painters. In the case of the sculptural maquettes, it repeated that “none of the works shows anything definitive. Everything remains for the artists to complete, analogous to the members of the National Assembly.” In other words, only when the moderates resolve the question of the Constitution and terminate the Provisional Government will the Republic complete itself, as a finished picture.

Here the conservative newspaper tried to link what they perceived as the negative traits of the sketch to the unfinished work of the Provisional Republic. On the one hand, the confident and bold execution of the first idea conjured up the creative, dynamic Republic which disturbed conservatives, while on the other, they could condemn the sketch trial in the same breath as the Republic for its vague and optimistic promises. In this way they inevitably touched upon a philosophical contradiction that challenged the fundamental concept of the new state. The attempt to achieve the final republic by a series of trials, or sketchlike policies that comprise a continuously unfolding government, represented an attempt to reach the authentic realization of the social form or general will. But insofar as the regime had to be

final and complete in order to produce the good society, the sketched-out plans must have been frustrating approximates. The collective art of the fledgling republic was a sketch inspired by the ideal that it could not reach but could not cease attempting—hence the image of the radical Republic in perpetual motion. This attempt has many spontaneous features but it could not sustain the definitive work. The spontaneity and the stability of the social order were incompatibly posed against each other like sketch and finished work.

Here I believe it would be instructive to point out that one of the foremost exponents of conservatism in 19th-century France, Louis de Bonald, compared the France of the Restoration with the finished picture. Following Waterloo, Bonald wrote that the agenda of the Congress of Vienna should accord France a special role in its plans for the reorganization of the Continent. Central to his scenario for the rejuvenation of a Catholic monarchy in Europe was the reestablishment of France’s leadership, a mission for which the French nation was preordained by divine will. Monarchical France should have boundaries extending to its “natural limits,” and subsequently no longer dependent for its existence on expansionist ambitions and passions: it could mediate the conflicts of other European nations dominated by their self-interested objectives. Bonald referred to French society under these circumstances as “fixed,” as literally “une société finie.” He repeated this thought again when he privileged his ideal for France alone, that it is the only “société finie qui puisse devenir une société parfaite.”16

The difference between the conservatives and the radicals could be metaphorically expressed in terms of the contrast between sketch and picture. For the former the justification for social hierarchy and the vigilant suppression of dangerous ideas implied a coherent view of human institutions with definitive contours, while for the latter the reconstitution of society along egalitarian lines and commitment to ongoing social change and dynamically unfolding possibilities implied the open-ended, unpolished draft. Thus it is not surprising that the forces that led to the setting up of the Commune in Paris in 1871 encouraged the climate in which a new band of sketchers could thrive. The patriotic tread of the Commandant Charles Delescluze emphasized the unplanned and spontaneous rising of the people, and admonished them to let their “revolutionary energy” overwhelm their enemy. Once again the rhetoric of revolution and the character of the sketch came together. Louis Courajod, the unprogressive author of L’Ecole royale des élèves protégés—an attempt to revive the old tradition—wrote the year of the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874: “The danger of art in France lies in . . . contempt for authority, the hatred of a hierarchical system even in the sphere of education, and a wildest intellectual democracy which degrades the highest minds to the level of the lowest.”17

The attack on the Impressionists took the form of an attack on the sketchlike character of the work, but conservatives also admitted that the movement constituted a real alternative for those who felt that art “needs more freedom than that granted it by the administration.” Louis Leroy, whose satiric review of the Impressionist exhibition gave the group its label, wrote that “stupid people who are finicky about the drawing of a hand don’t understand a thing about impressionism, and great Manet would chase them out of his republic.” Although Manet did not exhibit in the group show, he had been a member of the Federation of Artists organized by Courbet during the Commune, and was appointed to a committee that would have had wide-ranging control over art education and public commissions. Here the sketcher par excellence is expressly identified with a recent revolutionary situation.

At the same time, the Impressionists were defended by those critics who saw in their sketch technique the rejuvenation of French society after the disastrous events of 1870-1871 including defeat by the Prussians, loss of the territory of Alsace-Lorraine, and catastrophic civil war. Durandy’s La nouvelle peinture, generally taken as the manifesto of the group, noted in 1876 that the work of the young painters demonstrated that “A young branch has developed on the old tree trunk of art.”18 He laid great emphasis on the revolutionary character of this artistic renewal and rejuvenation:

Those who worship at the shrine of correctness are content to sacrifice to it what is new and original . . . The others, for their part, accept an occasional lack of correctness in return for the precious discoveries they make in the fields of novelty, delicacy,
sensibility and originality and surely theirs is the better bargain.

At one point Durandy addressed an imaginary body of Ecole students as the remnants of an outdated social order. "Like feudal serfs you are bound to the land of official art by the legitimists, while these new painters are considered artistic revolutionaries. The battle is between you and them. . . . You deserve liberation. They will bring it to you."

Over and over again he uses the metaphor of combat: for example, he asks whether the Impressionists will be the founders of a great artistic resurgence, "or will they be simply cannon-fodder? Will they be no more than the front-line soldiers sacrificed by marching into fire, whose bodies fill one ditch to form the bridge over which those following must pass?"

But in the main his argument is ironically a special plea for liberal bourgeois supremacy on the eve of casting out the last remnants of the monarchist coalition and the setting up of the Third Republic. He attacked the conservative painter of North African subjects, Fromentin, who celebrated the heroic character of Bedouin horsemen, for "hinder-
ing the colonisation of Algeria." The sketch ethos he had now been usurped by the bourgeois who violently suppressed the Communards. The improvised surfaces of Impressionist painting, originally perceived as anachronistic expressions, later gained almost universal respectability, as a liberal response to the dual demands for order and institutional change.

The post-Impressionist Van Gogh tried to recover the revolutionary qualities of the sketch for the popular classes. His commitment to sketch practice is summed up in a letter to Theo:

Though the enclosed sketch is very unfinished, it seemed to me there might be things in it compatible with your intentions—and again, it is a 'sketch from life.' . . . For it must not lose its freshness that way, and, if only the impression is correct, sometimes there is expression even in unfinished things.

Here Van Gogh clearly demonstrated his debt to the academic discourse of the sketch and the recent debates over the Impressionists' sketch techniques. But his involvement in this process had a larger social significance. When he began painting his Potato-Eaters, he told Theo that he "wished to give an impression of a way of life quite different from that of we civilized people . . . I am convinced I get better results by painting them in their roughness than by giving them a conventional charm." And in what is perhaps his most revealing statement in this context: "I have tried to emphasize that those people, eating their potatoes in the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labor, and how they have honestly earned their food."

Explicating at length about qualities that sketches of the peasantry should include, Van Gogh explained that he felt it would be wrong:

... to give a peasant picture a certain conventional smoothness.

If a peasant picture smells of bacon, smoke, potato steam—all right, that's not unhealthy; if a stable smells of dung—all right, that belongs to a stable; if the field has an odor of ripe corn or potatoes or of guano or manure—that's healthy, especially for city people.

Thus Van Gogh identified those qualities of the sketch—its freshness, its coarseness, and its lack of smoothness—with the character traits of the peasants he wished to paint in all their sordid reality. The sketch's directness allowed for an expressive equivalency of the character of the subject he wished to project on canvas. The sketch's forthrightness and sincerity appealed to Vincent's imagination and integrity, and his disposition was notably inspired by Michelet and the reformers of 1848 who proclaimed their program in a "manly and vigorous way." In 1884 he noted that simply by reversing the last two numbers of the year he could reanimate that period of radical politics that inspired him and with which he totally identified.10

At risk of arousing even greater controversy, I would also like to suggest that the formation of the New York School, itself the outgrowth of the long sketching tradition,19 occurred under politically alive and invigorating circumstances. In the post-World War II years, especially the period 1946-48, a rare moment in American history occurred again when there was a wide range of political discussion. The Progressive Party of Henry Wallace and the discussions it provoked constituted a brief interval of light between the New Deal openness of exchange and the right-wing oppression of the 1950s. From 1946 to 1947 political debate dominated American social life; while the Popular Front was finally pressured into oblivion by the shabby performance of Truman, the hardline Stalinist policies of the Soviet Union, the American Left remained politically powerful with the Congress on Progressive Democracy still a vital political force until Wallace's defeat in the 1948 elections.21

It was in this interval that the Abstract Expressionists organized themselves and entered new positions and alignments. Aesthetic and political shifts occurred, and out of it was born the latest avant-garde. As in the previous examples, the works were overperceived by critics on both the Right and the Left. The New York School's independence, originality, and robustness came to be seen as an expression of the national will, spirit, and character and was heralded as the riposte to Soviet Socialist Realism whose affinity with an older academic tradition supposedly revealed its conservatism, anachronism, and lack of progress. Reactionaries like Congressman George Dondero of Michigan, however, who equated modern art with Bolshevism, attacked the modernists especially for underming the hallowed tradition of academism. His argument, as you read it between the lines of the Congressional Record, restates the traditional fear of originality and its links to progressive social movement.

The ongoing fascination with the sketch, as strikingly exemplified in the present exhibit organized by the curator of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, carries with it the tradition I have only briefly outlined.

The sketch's incompleteness in the larger sense corresponds to the imperfect state of society and our social relations. Although we must never hope to attain perfection, we must never cease striving for it. The conservative call for order is a finalizing principle, a belief that except for a few rough edges here and there perfection already exists— as indeed it does for a rarefied few. But if some have achieved heaven on earth, the greater part of humanity must continue to strive for the open-ended ideal expressed in the sketch.

1. This paper was originally written as a talk for the symposium, The Role of the Oil Sketch since 1800," organized by John Dobkin, Barbara S. Krukik, and William Butler for the National Academy of Design. I am grateful to John Dobkin, the Director of the NAD, for going public with this manuscript and making it available for the exhibition, "Oil Sketches from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts 1816-1963." After closing at the NAD on March 15, the exhibition traveled to the Elvehjem Museum of Art Madison, Wisconsin; the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia; and the Lowe Art Museum, Coral Gables, Florida. The two-vol-

ume catalogue for the exhibition was written by Philippe Grunche and contains essays by Bruno Fouscat and Charles de Couessem.


3. I found this book to be very helpful in the writing of my essay.


5. Mural, in its public and didactic character is a political function, takes on the qualities of the sketch although it requires a methodical execution. Yet the need to be seen from afar obligates the muralist to work in broad open forms rather than in niggling brushwork, and in this sense it retains some of the openness of the sketch. The muralist must actually conceptualize the idea in a form analogous to the sketch, and the resulting condensation and simplification must be sustained throughout the tightly controlled process of execution. Here, obviously, it is not merely technique that will do, but the capacity to sustain a single, sharply defined idea that marks the successful mural, as well as the sketch. For the Mexican muralist Siqueiros considered any work of art other than a mural as a sketch. Here, the juxtaposition is meant to indicate the distance between a private, bourgeois expression and the public, socialist expression.


16. A.D.J., "Concours national: Figure symbolique de la République française," L'Illustration, vol. 11, 6 May 1848, p. 158.

17. L. De Bondy, Réflexions sur l'intérêt général de l'Europe, suivi de quelques consi-
déraisons sur la noblesse, Paris, 1815, pp. 37, 35, 40.


21. Painters of the New York School frequently stated that they did not do sketches, but their vehement disavowal of any link between their work and the sketch tradition indicates their preoccupation with this process whether or not they did so in actual practice.