

## GALLERY VIEW

JOHN RUSSELL

# Thomas Couture's Heroic Vision of France

Blocked due to copyright.  
See full page image or  
microfilm.

Couture's "The Enrollment of the Volunteers in 1792" — "Liberty personified"

**T**homas Couture and the Painting of History" at the Museum of Art in Springfield, Massachusetts, is precisely the kind of exhibition that does honor to a relatively minor museum. Built around one of the museum's own paintings — a sketch by Couture for his "Enrollment of the Volunteers" — it takes a single clearly defined subject and works away at it until we know something new about art history, something new about political history, and something new about the history of ideas.

Above all, it reminds us that heroic energy was once fundamental to the subject matter of high art. Decisions were taken, vows were exchanged, deeds were done. Hesitation was taboo, and never did a man go back on his word. In such ways did art renew our faith in human nature. We got from painting and sculpture alike the kind of charge that we get from Verdi's operas when tenor and baritone pledge themselves to an indestructible loyalty.

But it's been quite awhile since those things could be found in high art. In paintings like Jacques-Louis David's "Oath of the Horatii" and Eugène Delacroix's "Liberty in 1830" we hear trumpets that no one now knows how to play and cymbals that have long since been melted down. Heroism is for the movies — or so one would think — and it may well be that the last great public commission for a heroic subject in painting at the highest level was the one given to Thomas Couture by the French Government in October 1848.

Couture at that time was the man of the hour. In the Paris Salon of 1847 he had made himself famous throughout France for an enormous painting called "The Romans of the Decadence." As a group portrait of a doomed society, this still commands our attention in the Louvre. Couture could have gone on painting luxurious degenerates for the rest of his life. But he was by nature a man of energy, a man of heart, and a man with a heroic vision of what France had once been and might be again: a nation united behind the concept of liberty, equality and fraternity.

In this, he was at one with a great historian, Jules Michelet, who was at that same time in full output. As the art historian Michael Fried has pointed out, Michelet between December 1847 and February 1848 gave a series of lectures at the College de France in Paris in which he gave his matchless eloquence a topical turn. France at that time had a king and a government which were hardly less in decline than the Romans of the Decadence. To get rid of them was a mission of the first urgency. What better task for art than to revive the memory of the French Revolution at its blazing best? And what better choice of subject than the Enrollment of the Volunteers in 1792?

The enrollment in question had taken place in July 1792 at a time of national emergency. The Prussian armies had invaded France. Every Frenchman, young or not so young, was needed to drive them back. Nothing short of a unanimous national rising would be enough. And in no time at all 600,000 volunteers pledged themselves to drive back the invaders. Legend had it that fathers and sons, aristocrats and proletarians, born heroes and scallywags alike came forward (in pre-Freudian terms) "to caress the cannons." Women were no less active than men, and one at least among them seemed to her contemporaries the very personification of liberty. This was, moreover, the moment at which the "Marseillaise" got its name. Against all the odds

the Prussian armies were driven back at the Battle of Valmy, and no less an observer than Goethe himself thought that a new era for mankind was at hand.

Couture lost no time in getting down to the "Enrollment." By December 1847 he had sketches to show; in February 1848 King Louis-Philippe was finally got rid of and the work of rebuilding France went forward in an atmosphere which, though short-lived, was one in which everything seemed possible and euphoria was almost universal. In October 1848 Couture received an official commission for a full-scale version of the "Enrollment." Couture was a convinced republican, a friend of Michelet, and a man admired to the point of ecstasy. He was all set to revive the tradition of history painting at its highest level. Everyone was behind him, and it seemed as if nothing could go wrong, and that the "Enrollment" would end up as a French national treasure.

But it didn't work out. Before long the new government decided that it didn't want to have too much talk about liberty, let alone about unanimous popular risings and the people's right to bear arms. The personification of Liberty on which Couture's whole composition was based was too inflammatory by half. The Minister concerned said that the painting was for demagogues, not for middle-of-the-road men who were happy with the status quo. In December 1851 the commission was rescinded, and the unfinished painting remained on Couture's hands until the day of his death.

**'The Minister concerned said that the painting was for demagogues, not for middle-of-the-road men who were happy with the status quo.'**

This is the story that Springfield has to tell. It is a socio-political story, but it also has to do with esthetic ambitions of an altogether exceptional order. It is a didactic exhibition, in that there is a great deal to read, but it is also a lesson in how to make paintings and drawings work together. The organizers, Robert Henning of the Springfield Museum and Professor Albert Boime of U.C.L.A., were able to borrow a large number of drawings and sketches from French provincial sources, together with others that attest to the affection with which Couture has always been held in this country. (He returned the compliment by borrowing the look of George Washington for one of the most conspicuous figures in the "Enrollment.") Between them, and with the help of American authorities in other disciplines, they have recreated one of the most poignant episodes in the history of French 19th-century painting.

The excellent catalogue costs \$16. Couture enthusiasts should note the imminent publication by the Yale University Press of Albert Boime's long-awaited and monumental book on Couture. ■

Blocked due to copyright.  
See full page image or  
microfilm.

A stage design by Felice Giani, on view at Cooper-Hewitt Museum

Scott Hyde

**ANYONE WHOSE**

*The New York Times*

Copyright © The New York Times  
Originally published April 27, 1980