

Academic, Yes, Decadent, No

TO THE EDITOR:

IN A recent article, Hilton Kramer characterized the revival of academic traditions as a sign of "a certain decadence." Viewed in the light of the lone example he reproduced — Sir William Russell Flint's "The Judgment of Paris" — one would certainly have no choice but to concur with him.

But the shift in artistic taste to which Kramer alludes is by no means limited to the narrow range marked out by this example. Indeed, it is precisely this contracted view of academic art and the stereotypical exploitation of academies as foils for the avant-garde movements that has aroused the suspicion and curiosity of a whole new generation of students and spectators. The present generation dismisses as untenable the classroom account of 19th-century art as a sequence of moral contests between an Academic Evil and a Romantic, Impressionist or Neo-Impressionist Good.

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Why this total repression of an academic art which dominated the Western world for over a century, and why the egregious over-simplification of its goals on the part of scrupulous scholars who should know better? While the academic tradition certainly produced some tawdry examples, can anyone deny that the Romantic, Impressionist, Neo-Impressionist and even Expressionist traditions produced their share of potboilers? But art historians and art critics have for so long specialized in looking for the weaknesses in academic work that they have entirely overlooked its strengths.

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French academicians like Gérôme and Henner not only embodied an older tradition but also grappled visually with psychological problems

that would in turn be taken up by Rousseau, Léger, Matisse and Picasso. Dali has more than once testified to the generative possibilities of academic art in his celebration of Bouguereau and Meissonier. And what of Ingres — who is one day certain to displace Delacroix as the single most vital figure in the development of 19th-century art? The Pre-Raphaelites and Victorian academicians like G. F. Watts and Sir Frederic Leighton produced haunting supernatural allegories—replete with a rich sexual symbolism and spatial ambiguities — curiously in tune with contemporary psychedelic art. The German academician Karl von Piloty encompassed in his sphere of influence such later masters as Lenbach, Max, Makart, Defregger and Leibl, and the relationship between Franz von Stuck and his pupils Klee and Kandinsky is a rich mine of ore remaining to be tapped. Indeed, a single moment's reflection on the fact that almost every avant-garde artist derived initial sustenance from the academic system would demonstrate that, far from representing a "dying" tradition, the academies and their followers provided a generative stimulus in the evolution of contemporary art.

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The idea that this revival is a sign of "a certain decadence" is also to suggest that the dominant taste of that current period is a sign of progress. Is Kramer here specifying decadence in the art world or referring generally to the public realm? When we look to the latter, we find an awesome fusion of technological miracles and outdated encounters with racial strife, poverty and war in Vietnam — a rather conspicuous sign of "certain decadence." The art which purports to reflect this scene is technologically oriented and rejects the "old humanistic values." In terms of spiritual

progress, the current art trends are in some ways far more decadent than the old academies in their formal choices and gestures. While they share similar features like the predominantly classicizing, formal structure and the obsessively meticulous surface, the contemporaries go beyond academic depersonalization in their preoccupation with industrialized-looking artifacts.

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At the same time, however, the contemporaries have the positive merit of refining and heightening our perceptions, by encouraging drastic concentration on effects heretofore visually taken for granted. Offering us an entirely visual experience — free from allusive and metaphorical elements — they reveal more because they make us look more. The current art styles induce us to perceive as never before, and as a result we are revising our seeing habits with respect to the past as well. Since our previous modes of visual experience are being questioned, we are also encouraged to look with different eyes at the art of the past.

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The present generation, therefore, desires to explore our common assumptions about academic art, just as it wishes to question the policies emanating from government and the university. The revival of this tradition is as much a questioning of the falsified scheme promoted in the classroom and popular art books as it is the expression of a shift in taste. In this sense, it is less a sign of "decadence" than a natural and "progressive" inquiry into current prejudices of contemporary art history and criticism.

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