

Two Painters

THE PAINTINGS OF JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER

By Andrew McLaren Young, Margaret MacDonald and Robin Spencer with the assistance of Hamish Miles.

Illustrated. Volume 1, 248 pp. Volume 2, unpaginated. New Haven: Yale University Press. \$125 (\$150 after Dec. 31, 1980).

THOMAS COUTURE AND THE ECLECTIC VISION

By Albert Boime.

Illustrated. 683 pp. New Haven: Yale University Press. \$75.

By JOHN RUSSELL

IN the history of art — as in the history of war — enumeration is fundamental. What, which, how many and where? These are the questions to be answered, whether the problem is the number of Rembrandt's surviving self-portraits or the disposition of the German armies in 1944.

And enumeration means lists. Bernard Berenson may well live longest in art history not for any of his essays but for the bare unannotated lists of Italian old master paintings on which he spent so much of his life. Lists are often tedious to the outsider, but to the insider they mean the difference between truth and error, fame and ignominy, great wealth and the gutter.

So it is not surprising that so many art historians dream of producing the perfect catalogue raisonné: a book that will answer the what, the which, the how many and the where to everyone's satisfaction. Such a book will eventually sell out, at no matter how high a price. Besides, its compiler will be immortal, in that he will be to his subject what Köchel is to Mozart: the name that everyone knows.

The two-volume catalogue of Whistler's paintings was planned in the great grim city of Glasgow, Scotland, where the University has a very large Whistler holding which came to it primarily by way of gift and bequest from the artist's sister-in-law, legatee and executor, Miss Birnie Philip. It was planned and begun by Andrew McLaren Young, who for years presided over the Whistler holding with a most likable mixture of rigor and conviviality. After he died in 1975, three of his friends and colleagues completed it. And here it is, in a noble production made possible in large part by the Paul Mellon Center for Studies in British Art at Yale.

What will the layman get from such a compilation? The ins and outs of ownership may not grip him. Size, medium, condition, frame and exhibition history are matters he may prefer to skip. He may even think that the meticulous listing of 554 oil paintings (many of them now lost) is contrary to the spirit of an artist who often signed his pictures with a butterfly and was in public a compulsive tease. What butter-

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James McNeill Whistler's "Arrangement in Grey: Portrait of the Painter," 1872.



Thomas Couture's "The Madman," c.1860.

fly is at its best in a filing cabinet?

But with patience and a little imagination the lay reader will find that this catalogue is a treasury of unfamiliar and wonderful paintings by Whistler. He will also find that even the most familiar paintings take on a new and unforeseeable freshness as fact locks into fact and anecdote into anecdote. One of the great Whistlers is, for instance, the portrait of Théodore Duret that now hangs in the new American Wing at the Met next to William Merritt Chase's portrait of Whistler. We know and love that picture. But this catalogue will tell us how it came to be painted, what Whistler's purpose was, what stages the picture went through, and how Duret showed it off to visitors when he got it home. Multiply that kind of enlightenment several hundred times over and you will see why a catalogue of this kind is the ally of understanding and the henchman of delight.

"Thomas Couture and the Eclectic Vision" is at a far extreme from the taut, lean outline of the catalogue raisonné. It is the definitive Life and Times of a substantial painter, with everything set down and nothing — and, in this case, you can believe it, *nothing* — left out. Faced with Albert Boime's text, which must run to around 300,000 words, and with his hundreds of illustrations, the layman may think with nostalgia of the short and shapely books with which an older generation of historians managed to sum up even Piero della Francesca, even Raphael and even Vermeer.

No one — and least of all Professor Boime — would argue that Couture is in their class. But there are situations in which the long book is the only right book.

and this is one of them. Couture is in more than one way a special case. With the exception of the enormous "Romans of the Decadence" in the Louvre, not one of his major paintings has what might be called maximum exposure in a great museum. Much of his work is located in French provincial museums — Compiègne, Senlis, Beauvais — where only the faithful seek it out. (To see one of the most telling of all his paintings, "The Realist" of 1865, we have to go to the municipal art school in Cork, Ireland.) He will never be a hero in the auction rooms: too few of his paintings are now in private hands. Yet no one who saw the recent Couture exhibition at the Museum of Art in Springfield, Mass., or who sees it in the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Mass., where it will be on view from September 20 through November 2, can doubt that Thomas Couture was a most remarkable painter. He had a natural gift and great energy, he knew just where to look for what would suit his purpose, and he had an exalted conception of what a great painter could do for the society of which he was a part.

Professor Boime is not an idealizer. He comes right out, in fact, and says that in his personal behavior "Couture compromised all of his life. He acted cowardly on numerous occasions, sold out his principles, and lied knowingly to others." If he thinks that Couture fell below his best in his portrait of his hero and mentor, the historian Jules Michelet, he comes right out about that too. This is not the kind of book that takes a second-rank painter and makes claims for his work that cannot be fulfilled. Couture in his major undertakings was learned, resourceful, various and committed. He concerned himself deeply with what was going on in France in his time, and he saw it as the duty of every responsible man to bear witness. He also saw it as the duty of the responsi-

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ble painter to establish the modalities within which painting could usefully continue.

In this last context, Couture's biographer has hard work to do. Couture in his own paintings was alive to everything that had lately been done in art. Where others sided either with Ingres or with Delacroix, Couture aimed to tread a firm middle ground somewhere in between. Unlike the reclusive Delacroix and the haughty and relentlessly distinguished Ingres, Couture made a point of being accessible to young people on a comradely basis. His gigantic ego was allied in this matter to a sense of human duty, and eventually it came about that either formally or informally Couture had an influence of one kind or another upon almost all the major painters of his time.

That he influenced both Manet and Puvis de Chavannes has long been known. But Professor Boime goes into the matter of Couture's teaching with an ardor, and with a superabundant energy, that remind us of Couture himself. He carries us with him when he says that "Hardly a single seminal French, American, Swedish or German painter or movement after mid-century escaped his influence." Couture's effect

upon Courbet, Daumier, Cézanne, Renoir and many another major Frenchman is very well documented in these pages, and we understand as never before why Apollinaire should have included "the studio of Couture" among the chief influences on living art in Paris in the year 1914. When Lewis Mumford wrote many years ago of "the inevitable Couture," he was not speaking lightly.

Couture was loved above all, perhaps, by his American students. With his independence of nature, his free-and-easy ways and his generosity of spirit, he made them feel at home — almost *back* at home, in fact — in a way that they would never have experienced at an official school. He was his own man, absolutely, in a way that we may think of as almost American. "I have never been able to learn by academic methods," he once wrote. "I cannot say whether academic training is bad or good, because I have never understood it." When he published his two volumes of studio talk, volume I bore the dedication "To America." What could be more appropriate than that an American scholar should produce this monumental re-assessment? "Thomas Couture and the Eclectic Vision" is a big book, and a heavy book, and an expensive book, but no one who wants to understand 19th-century painting can afford to be without it. ■

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