From Homer to the Harem. The art of Jean Lecomte du Nouy (1842-1923)
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INTRODUCTION

Throughout his long life, Jean Lecomte du Nouy (1842-1923) remained faithful to the academic principles he had been taught during his formal training as a painter. Even though he created several images that made him a distinguished personality among his contemporaries, his fervent adherence to long established aesthetic values towards the end of the 19th century – when modernist concepts of individuality and originality in artistic expression slowly but surely began to prevail – caused his eventual demise into oblivion. Similar stories of artistic careers that moved from lifetime fame to present-day obscurity can be told of countless artists who matured in the second half of the 19th century. Painters such as Luc Olivier Merson (1846-1920) and Jules Joseph Lefebvre (1836-1911), and sculptors like Eugène Guillaume (1822-1905) and Alexandre Falguière (1831-1900), to name only a few examples, remained truthful to the lessons of their teachers and never truly embraced the modernist criteria that ultimately triumphed and that are generally still valued today. In the second half of the 19th century, the often heated discussion between tradition-minded artists and critics and those seeking alternative means of expression found its most prominent arena in France, though the reversal of fame for many Victorian artists, for example, indicates that similar cultural shifts occurred throughout the Western world.

The ideas and motivations that caused these artistic transitions in the late 19th century are complex, and must be taken into account when studying the oeuvre of a painter like Lecomte du Nouy. The fact that artists of his persuasion once again receive serious consideration is a noteworthy phenomenon in itself, and may indicate how the pendulum of taste and critical attention is slowly starting to swing back. In recent years, artists such as Lawrence Alma Tadema (1836-1912), Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899), Jules Breton (1827-1906), Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret (1852-1929), Jean-Paul Laurens (1838-1921), Frederic Leighton (1830-1896), Ernest Meissonier (1815-1891) and John William Waterhouse (1849-1917), among others, have been the subject of serious publications and major exhibitions. Could it be that we have experienced saturation with the currently established pantheon of late 19th–century masters like Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), Edgar Degas (1834-1917) and Edouard Manet (1832-1883)? Their artistic achievements and significance are not in the least being challenged here, but the study of 19th–century art has for too long been reduced to, and dominated by, artists who fit only the modernist aesthetic criteria. Of course, the best reason for the re-evaluation of particular academic artists would be
the realization that their work also, or once again, has the power to speak to a 21st-century audience, and even if their work still does not convince everybody from a purely artistic point of view, there most certainly is a historical perspective that is worth exploring and rediscovering.

A prolific portraitist, Lecomte du Nouy derived his primary inspiration from subjects related to classical history, the Bible, and his many travels abroad. Thus he essentially devoted himself to visualizing both a geographically distant present and a chronologically distant past. He studied for some eight years under the supervision of Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904), whose artistic beliefs would always remain his guiding force. Concisely put, the academic principles that Lecomte du Nouy adopted stemmed from a reverence for ideal form – as epitomized by ancient classical and Renaissance art – with a strong emphasis on the representation of the human body that functioned as the central component in any narrative work of art. This concept went hand in hand with exquisite craftsmanship and skilful execution. Early in his career, Lecomte du Nouy enjoyed undisputed triumphs at the Paris Salon by receiving a gold medal in 1866 and 1869, a second-class medal in 1872, and the Legion of Honor in 1876, to name only the most significant French governmental distinctions. Indeed, the artist was truly a veteran of the Salon, as he exhibited at that venue almost every year between 1863 and 1923. By mid-career, however, his work received decidedly mixed reactions. There always remained true devotees and admirers, but most observers displayed far less enthusiasm for his art.

Writings generated about Lecomte du Nouy’s oeuvre by his contemporaries not only illustrate his tenuous position within the art world, but also provide a representative case study of the critical discourse among the adherents of the academic tradition, their modernist opponents, and the many voices in between.1 In this book, Lecomte du Nouy’s major works are broadly examined through these eyewitness accounts, which typically appeared in the critics’ published deliberations about works displayed at the Paris Salons and the Universal Exhibitions. By quoting all texts on a particular painting that I have encountered during my research, this book proves that most of Lecomte du Nouy’s works incited positive as well as negative reactions. Although certain criteria for approval or dismissal recur, it is revealing that the arguments could

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1 For a general discussion about the interaction between artists and critics in this period, see Sloane 1951, which provides many brief biographies of critics, as well as Bouillon 1990, which provides an anthology of French art criticism in the second half of the 19th century.
differ greatly even among critics who adhered to similar ideas about the course of contemporary art.

In order to define the parameters of the various critical approaches, it is instructive first to focus on two specific texts by authors who clearly represent the extremes. On the one hand, a passage from Jules Castagnary’s Salon review of 1872 is worth paraphrasing extensively, as it illustrates concisely the growing attitude that traditional painters like Lecomte du Nouy were facing in the second half of the 19th century. A staunch opponent of traditional academic values and an early supporter of Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), Castagnary was pleased to notice how few mythological and religious paintings hung at the 1872 Salon, and that the audience hardly paid any attention to them. He argued that once society had become enamored with nature and realities, all dreamlike and idealized representations looked insipid. People had lost interest in ancient rituals, and before long they would take issue with religious imagery too. The biblical, allegorical and mystical world was past, and Castagnary blamed the government for supporting such art, viewing commissions by the Ministère de l’Instruction Publique et des Beaux-Arts as a legacy of the Imperial administration destroyed in 1871. (Lecomte du Nouy would receive precisely such a commission in 1873, specifically two altarpieces for the Church of the Holy Trinity in Paris, figs. 113/114.) Arguing that the Third Republic (1871-1940) should not support art that no longer represented the taste of the public, Castagnary urged the discontinuation of such subsidies. How better to initiate the separation of Church and State than through painting? He noted not only the retreat of mythological and religious subjects, but also of historical scenes set in antiquity, the Middle Ages, or the more recent past. He called them the refuge of two decomposing schools, the classical and the romantic: “The audience hardly stops in front of them, except when attracted to the strangeness of the scene, such as […] The Bearers of Bad Tidings, [fig. 82] by Mr. Lecomte du Nouy.”

Castagnary’s jubilant account of the demise of traditional academic art is somewhat tempered by other reviewers’ testimonies. The very painting by Lecomte du Nouy that Castagnary singled out, The Bearers of Bad Tidings, did not just stop visitors in their tracks, it seems to have attracted enormous crowds and firmly established the artist’s reputation. The work depicts a pharaoh having killed the messengers who brought him bad news, and the composition

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2 Castagnary 1892, II, p. 20-22; for French text see cat. 64. On Castagnary, see Bouillon 1990.
3 Idem.
became extremely well known through countless photographic and printed reproductions. Moreover, the image was reused in various other forms and thus became embedded in popular culture. For someone like Castagnary, however, this painting, indeed the whole of Lecomte du Nouy’s oeuvre, represented everything abhorrent in contemporary art.

On the other hand, there were critics, and probably a larger portion of the Salon audience than Castagnary would have liked to admit, who admired Lecomte du Nouy’s work and respected his unwavering adherence to the *beau idéal*, an aesthetic approach that built upon long established rules of idealized beauty and instilled art with edifying qualities. This other extreme of the critical spectrum is reflected in an introduction to a survey of Lecomte du Nouy’s oeuvre, written as late as 1914 by the artist’s decidedly conservative biographer, friend, and admirer, Guy de Montgailhard. In it the author first derided the modern schools (which had already invaded the museums and commercial galleries) as forming an attack on the elegance and good taste for which France had justly gained a reputation. How this differed, he argued, from art that was sincere, studied, worked out, and inspired by a search for Beauty and Truth. He was pleased, for the public’s good and the honor of art, that there still existed artists who adhered to the cult of Beauty, and Lecomte du Nouy, of course, was one of them.4

The large number of critics who discussed Lecomte du Nouy’s work on a regular basis, whether favorably or disparagingly, confirm his status within the artistic establishment. More

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4 Montgailhard 1914, p. 40-41, the whole introduction reads: “Les amis des arts éprouvent, même lorsqu’ils feignent d’admirer, quelque lassitude à contempler stoïquement les œuvres picturales ou sculpturales des écoles modernes. Tant d’outrecuidances, mêlées à un large fond de banalité, d’où émergent parfois des vigueurs maladroites et des idées mal conçues, laissent, après leur vision au concours des expositions multiples qui envahissent les palais nationaux ou les galeries privées, une impression quelque peu pénible pour notre renom national d’élegance, de bon goût et de bon ton. Et ceux qui signent ces œuvres dites d’art le comprennent si bien qu’ils internationalisent leurs noms, afin de passer pour des étrangers, aidés sans doute par des exemples célèbres. C’est habile, si ce n’est pas très français, mais est-ce plus artistique?

Tout autre est l’impression ressentie quand on se trouve en présence d’une suite d’œuvres sincères, étudiées, travaillées, inspirées par la recherche du Beau et de la Vérité. Je sais qu’une certaine partie de la critique les traite de vieilleries à peine bonnes à orner les salles désuètes des musées de province. Mais que ces détecteurs, qui ont peut-être, jadis, parcouru le musée du Louvre, passent une heure dans l’hôtel du boulevard Haussmann où la plus merveilleuse collection française vient d’être offerte au public, et ils me diront si les toiles et les statues qui l’enrichissent tiennent du cubisme, du pointillisme, de toutes les erreurs visuelles à la mode, ou bien si elles évoquent seulement à nos yeux enthousiasmés l’image réconfortante de la Beauté vraie, interprétée par des talents simples, originaux et savants.

Pour notre bonheur, et pour l’honneur de l’art, il existe encore quelques artistes qui ont conservé bien intact ce culte du Beau que l’on chérissait autrefois et qui seul était à la mode, lorsque l’habileté ne remplaçait pas le savoir, quand on apprenait à dessiner avant de se mêler de peindre, et que les artistes essayaient d’avoir une idée sans borner leur tâche à la recherche d’un simple effet. C’est dans cette catégorie – que les écoles modernes ont bien restreinte – que se place J. Lecomte du Nouy, le peintre éminent dont je vais détailler l’œuvre, et qui sait manier l’ébauchoir avec
frequently than not, these writings allude to his indebtedness to Gérôme. This did not necessarily imply that his famous teacher was more accomplished, but that Lecomte du Nouy, who worked a generation later, painted very similar subjects. Or, as Gaston Schéfer put it, his and many of his compatriots’ works all had “quelque chose de déjà vu.” For Lecomte du Nouy, however, this was nothing to be ashamed of, and he had consciously placed himself in that position. A painter who claimed “Gérôme est mon maître et Raphaël mon Dieu” is not to be counted among his era’s artistic innovators, and he did not want to be. By declaring his faith in Raphael (1483-1520), he also immediately aligned himself with artists such as Ingres (1780-1867), professing his allegiance to the neoclassical tradition. He favored meticulous painterly craftsmanship over the freer, suggestive brushwork originally championed by Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) and other romantics, and ultimately developed in various ways by the anti-academics and modernists. If today one compares Lecomte du Nouy’s pictures with Paul Cézanne’s (1839-1906) profoundly analytical compositions, or Claude Monet’s (1840-1926) assiduous studies of nature, one would hardly guess that these three artists were contemporaries. Although Lecomte du Nouy rarely expressed (at least in print) his opinions of their work, they must have appeared to him as coarse and unfinished insults to a set of traditional artistic values that provided the “Artist” with professional and moral dignity. Moreover, their new approach contradicted his ingrained notion that narrative was the central component of any serious work of art.

Colored by our current, disproportionate emphasis on the more independent 19th-century artists and movements, we tend to ignore that most painters did not adhere to avant-gardist principles. Throughout the century, most French artists conformed to a more or less well-organized, state-controlled system of education, exhibitions and commissions. Even after 1880, when the Salons were no longer under the jurisdiction of the State but run by artists, these venues (no matter how imperfect in terms of viewing conditions and overcrowding) remained the crucial arena where most artists presented their work to the (buying) public, especially after State and Church patronage had diminished. The Salons’ role was gradually but surely assumed by a developing network of dealers and galleries that functioned as intermediaries with private
collectors. This changing landscape obviously suited the activities of independent artists, yet those holding on to more established ways also availed themselves of the new possibilities.

Lecomte du Nouÿ always remained a traditional academic painter, and he was an accomplished one. Some may deplore the fact that his style never truly evolved, yet this indicates that he acted out of a strong conviction. He consciously did not choose the path of modernism but opted to express himself with an elaborately finished technique that he applied to compositions that often feature stylized, even slightly mannerist, human figures. His art has been aptly defined as “Ingres faisant du Gérôme,” a characterization best validated by a picture such as The White Slave (L’esclave blanche; fig. 105). Although this work is clearly reminiscent of odalisques and harem scenes by both masters, Lecomte du Nouÿ created a distinct composition of his own that would never be mistaken for Ingres or Gérôme. Lecomte du Nouÿ rendered the woman in a somewhat awkward three-quarter profile and gave her an almost boneless body, yet he managed to convey her seductive radiance within a sultry environment that contributes to the lasting popularity of this picture. The writer Edmond Haraucourt astutely characterized the painter in the following terms: “One concedes readily that the art of Mr. Lecomte du Nouÿ does not please the majority of people, but no one passes indifferently by his canvases; they impose a respect and a vague restlessness that emanate from things with which one communicates uneasily, things that one only penetrates after a long study. The painting of Mr. Lecomte du Nouÿ recalls that of Ingres; it has its qualities and its shortcomings, the purity and the excessive neatness.”

No matter what the verdict on Lecomte du Nouÿ’s art may have been in the past, it is difficult for a 21st-century audience to form any opinion at all. Few of his paintings are on display in public collections, and very little has been written about him since he died. Guy de Montgailhard published the only extensive account in 1906, seventeen years before the artist’s death. That monograph is a trove of biographical information and includes a summary catalogue of the most important paintings, drawings and sculptures – ranging from Lecomte du Nouÿ’s first Salon exhibition of 1863 through that of 1906 (the year the book was published).

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9 Henri Bouchot paraphrasing an anonymous source in his preface to Montgailhard’s biography of Lecomte du Nouÿ; Montgailhard 1906, p. ix.
10 Haraucourt, cited from Montgailhard 1906, p. 61-62; for French text see cat. 219.
11 Montgailhard 1906.
Neither exhaustive nor without errors, the book fortunately does reproduce a great number of paintings, drawings, and some frescoes and sculptures. These photographs are often the only visual records of the artist’s works; in most cases their present whereabouts remain unknown. Many of the pictures discussed here probably linger in private and even public collections. Given these circumstances, Montgailhard’s book remains indispensable to anyone studying the artist, yet it is relatively rare and can only be found in a few libraries. The present study therefore seems pertinent and will hopefully help to revive the interest in Lecomte du Nouy’s art.

To introduce Lecomte du Nouy’s career and oeuvre to a contemporary audience, the first chapter of this book offers an updated biographical account and a general survey of the development of his art. The artist has often, yet always summarily, been featured in modern art-historical literature devoted to Orientalism, but factual biographical errors, such as his death-date or his alleged obtaining of the prix de Rome, are continually repeated. Building upon Montgailhard’s book with my own additional research, I have attempted to reconstruct Lecomte du Nouy’s formative years, when he studied successively under Charles Gleyre, Émile Signol, and Jean-Léon Gérôme. The latter part of his career is treated more concisely, not only because it is less well documented but also because he remained relatively constant in his philosophical and artistic approach. Judging from extant photographs, the quality of his late works seems to lag severely, even measured against his own academic standards. One photograph from around 1918, taken in Lecomte du Nouy’s studio, shows the old artist surrounded by several of his late pictures, most of which have not been traced (fig. 7). It is perilous to form an opinion solely on the basis of old reproductions, yet it cannot be denied that many of the late paintings seem to lack imagination. Not only do these works appear somewhat poorly executed, but few of them show the inventiveness in composition or subject matter that Lecomte du Nouy reached in his best early works, or they seem merely variations of previous successes.

The second chapter focuses on the three major categories (besides portraiture) that can be distinguished in Lecomte du Nouy’s oeuvre: his depiction of historical subjects (then often characterized as la peinture archéologique), his Orientalist works, and finally his religious paintings. Generated by archeological discoveries, there existed in the 19th century among

12 There are also the important collections of photographs and prints at the Bibotheque Nationale (Cabinet des Estampes) in Paris – here referred to as BN: DC 309, I-IV – as well as the photographs of his work at the Agence
scholars, artists, and the public at large an increasing interest in extinct peoples and customs. Gérôme was one of the main instigators of néo-grec painting, a particular approach to neoclassicism that Lecomte du Nouÿ favored as well. With the onset of colonialism and its pervasive economical, political, and social consequences, a similar curiosity was directed at contemporary foreign civilizations. The French focused particularly on North Africa and the Middle East. The resulting fashion for Orientalism in French arts not only encouraged the representation and documentation of exotic cultures, but also offered a convenient channel for artists and their audiences to project their personal ideas and fantasies. This striving for both a historical, representational accuracy and an exotic illusion – which at first seems rather paradoxical – converged in the Orientalist work of Lecomte du Nouÿ, as is well illustrated by The Dream of a Eunuch of 1874 (Un rêve d’eunuque; fig. 87). This and other works blend fact and fiction into intriguingly peculiar compositions, touching upon a variety of issues such as the appropriation of historical facts and literary sources, the perception of foreign cultures, race, sexuality, barbaric violence, despotism, and specific customs such as the consumption of hallucinatory drugs. The third distinctive category within Lecomte du Nouÿ’s oeuvre is religious imagery. A sizable number were inspired by his travels to the Middle East, in an era when contemporary peoples and settings there were thought to provide direct and visibly accurate evidence from Biblical episodes.

After a general assessment of Lecomte du Nouÿ’s artistic status in his time, a chronological listing of all his known works is provided. Montgailhard’s 1906 catalogue has not only been corrected and annotated, but is also expanded with other works that have since been recorded or located. While the 1906 catalogue records roughly 250 entries, I have been able to trace about 700 works, including many preparatory sketches and drawings and also works known to have been destroyed in the past. In addition, I have incorporated in this catalogue a large number of critical writings regarding individual works, whether positive or negative. In order not to merely paraphrase or cite isolated sentences in the main body of the text (at the risk of obscuring their context), the pertinent discussions are generally cited in their entirety and in their original language. Finally, a few fairly hard to find texts and documents with important information about the artist’s work have also been appended.

Photographique Roger Viollet, Paris (which can be viewed on-line at www.roger-viollet.fr).
This book is not an attempt to proclaim Lecomte du Nouÿ as one of the canonical painters of the 19th century. Instead, it is meant to encourage a modern audience to reconsider the artist as an intriguing academician in his own right, and to recognize that his art reflects the spirit of his era. He created some striking and original compositions that still have the power to speak to our imagination, and these works deserve to be placed in their broader artistic and historical context. Moreover, his oeuvre provides a fascinating case study of how late 19th-century academic art was positioned in its losing struggle with modernism, and how some painters tried to sustain certain traditional values that no longer seemed to speak to changing social and political circumstances. A wide-ranging body of criticism generated by Lecomte du Nouÿ’s work clarifies the nature of that conflict, and the present study is intended to contribute to a more complex and profound, and thus more accurate, understanding of French art of the late 19th century.