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

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FROM HOMER TO THE HAREM: JOURNEYS ON THE MAP AND IN THE MIND

I. THE NÉO-GRECS OR FAIRE DE L’ARCHÉOLOGIE

Although the academic tradition faced growing challenges during the second half of the nineteenth century, historical paintings were still widely produced. While more avant-garde artists like the Impressionists presented images of contemporary life in loose, fluid brushstrokes, a substantial number of their colleagues continued to illustrate historic events, real or imagined. The public forum for the art of Lecomte du Nouy and other painters working in this more traditional manner remained in the salons and International Exhibitions, held not only in Paris but throughout Europe and the United States; meanwhile, the artists of the avant-garde, individually and in groups, organized their own shows in dealers’ galleries and at other venues.¹

While history painting remained fundamental and vital to artists who continued to work in the academic tradition during this period, it too underwent numerous transformations. For example, contemporary critics of the salon exhibitions invariably discussed the subcategory of la peinture archéologique (archeological painting) or néo-grec painting, terms that were used almost interchangeably. Depending on the writer, this art form was seen either as an admirable renewal of painterly tradition, or a tenacious obstacle to artistic progress. In any case, the ubiquity of the genre made it impossible to ignore.

To fully comprehend Lecomte du Nouy’s brand of history painting in the classical tradition, one must turn to Gérôme, whose 1846 painting The Cock Fight (Combat de coqs, or, Jeunes Grecs faisant battre des coqs; fig. 32) was one of the works that launched the so-called néo-grec style, a painting that will be further discussed later in the chapter. Seven years later, the female sculptor and writer Claude Vignon (1832-88) attempted to define some of the elements of this style in an extensive salon review that included a

¹ For two comprehensive assessments of the development of the major French art institutions, see: White & White 1993, and: Mainardi 1993. For the relationship between painters and the French government during the Third Republic, see, Vaisse 1995.
chapter titled *École Néo-grecque*. In addition to Gérôme and Charles Gleyre, she reported on such exhibitors as Gustave Boulanger (1824-88), Ernest Gendron (1817-81), Jean-Louis Hamon (1821-74), Félix Jobbé-Duval (1821-89), Henri Picou (1824-95), and Isodore Pil (1813-75):

Here is the archeological school, of the pure, austere, and skillful line; it is the kind of painting that is slightly cold perhaps, sometimes dry and without color, but when handled by truly talented artists it can give us some delightful creations. The school has two very distinct tendencies, of which each had already some nice triumphs; one of these tendencies, the one that is above all archaic, has found its expression in *Stratonice* [1840, Chantilly, Musée Condé] by Ingres, and maybe even more in *The Greek Interior* [L'intérieur grec, 1850, private collection] by Gérôme as well as in his *Cock Fight* [fig. 32]. The other, that knows to combine the cult of line with a certain softness in execution, a lot of grace and delicacy, is mainly manifested in the works by Gleyre, and those by Picou, and Hamon. As one can see, there are the science of line and the poetry of line; and sometimes these unite in a masterpiece such as *The Evening* [Le soir, fig. 9] by Gleyre [...].

The narrow traditional definition of history painting as the solemn representation of noble and didactic subject matter, one championed by David and the Academy, was, from the mid-nineteenth-century, being redefined by a group of young artists. In their work, they went beyond the mere depiction of historical, mythological, and biblical subjects and the narrative emphasis shifted from the universal truth contained in mythology and religion to the anecdotal experience of specific individuals. Like the earlier Troubadour painters, who presented informal and personalized stories set in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Gérôme became one of the main exponents of genre scenes set in Greek and Roman antiquity.

The most important period for néo-grec painting was between 1847, when Gérôme exhibited his *Cock Fight* (fig. 32), and 1863, when he married and moved away

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2 Claude Vignon, *Salon de 1852* (Paris 1852), p. 109-110: “Voici l’école archéologue, de la ligne pure, austère et savante; c’est la peinture un peu froide peut-être et quelquefois sèche et sans couleur; mais aussi quand cette peinture est maniée par des artistes d’un véritable talent, quelles délicieuses créations ne nous donne-t-elle pas? Elle a d’ailleurs deux tendances bien distinctes dont chacune a déjà pu compter quelques beaux triomphes; l’une de ces tendances, celle qui est surtout archaïque, a trouvé son expression dans la Stratonice d’Ingres et plus peut-être encore dans l’Intérieur grec de Gérôme et dans son Combat de Coqs. L’autre, qui sait allier au culte de la ligne une certaine mollesse d’exécution, beaucoup de flou, de grâce et de délicatesse, s’est manifesté surtout dans les tableaux de Gleyre et dans ceux de Picou et d’Hamon. Il y a, on le voit, la science de la ligne et la poésie de la ligne. Quelquefois la science et la poésie se réunissent et enfantent un chef-d’œuvre, comme le Soir de la vie, de Gleyre [...]” On Vignon, see Bouillon 1990.
from his colleagues. This period roughly coincides with that of the Second Empire (1852-71), during which the decorative arts were also dominated by Greco-Roman ornament. In Paris, this taste for the antique culminated in the Maison pompéienne (the Pompeian House), built in 1856-58 by the architect Alfred Normand for Prince Joseph Napoleon Bonaparte (1822-91), for which Gérôme painted some decorative interior panels (figs. 78, 79).

Gérôme's *Cock Fight* represents an intimate, non-moralizing genre scene set in ancient times, rather than a heroic narrative intended to convey an edifying message. The influential writer, critic, and adherent of *l'art pour l'art*, Théophile Gautier, extensively praised this work by the then 23-year-old unknown Gérôme, who had elevated an ordinary subject to the scale and artistic standard of a history painting. As art historian Gerald Ackerman argues: “This unorthodox attitude toward the ancients would beguile its critics by careful, exquisite painting, fine detailing, and excellent coloring, and, of course, amuse them by its parody of the genre painting of the realists. Nudity and a faint or even overt eroticism would add a tender, piquant quality; and wit in invention and execution would keep the critic from taking himself too seriously.”

Besides Gérôme, other important early néo-grecs were Gleyre (Lecomte du Nouy’s first teacher), Henri Picou (1824-95), Jean-Louis Hamon (1821-74), and Gustave Boulanger (1824-88). After 1847, some of these artists shared quarters in a building in the rue de Fleurus called *Le chalet*. A somewhat disdainful assessment of their activities came from Champfleury (pseudonym for Jules Husson), a critic, collector, and advocate of such artists as Gustave Courbet and Richard Wagner. In an article, he referred to the group as *l'École Gérôme*, and observed with irony that: “In the evenings, citizen Picou

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3 Ackerman 1990. For a survey of *néo-grec* painting see also Whitely 1972, chapter III.
4 Ackerman 2000, p. 237, cat. nos. 84-85; and see note 68. On the Maison pompéienne (or, Palais pompéien) see also Gautier 1866.
5 Théophile Gautier, “Salon de 1847, Jeunes Grecs faisant battre des coqs,” *L'Artiste*, ser. 4, vol. 9 (June 6, 1847), p. 221: “Félicitons-nous de ce que le jury ait laissé passer, par distraction apparemment, au Salon de 1847, un charmant tableau plein de finesse et d'originalité d'un jeune homme dont nous entendons parler pour la première fois, et dont c'est le début si nous ne nous trompons: nous voulons dire les *Jeunes Grecs faisant battre des coqs*, de M. Gérôme. Ce sujet, tout vulgaire en apparence, a pris sous le fin crayon et le pinceau délicat de M. Gérôme une élégance rare et une distinction exquise; c'est nest pas, comme on pourrait le croire au choix du thème adopté par l'artiste, une toile de petite dimension, comme cela est habituel pour de semblables fantasias. Les figures sont de grandeur naturelle et traitées d'une façon tout historique. Il faut beaucoup de talent et de ressources pour élever une scène si épisodique au rang d'une composition noble et que ne désavouerait aucun maître.” On Gautier, see Bouillon 1990, and Guégan 1997.
6 Ackerman 1990, p. 176.
sung melodies in the atelier that he had deciphered from an Etruscan manuscript; the head of the school, citizen Gérôme, dissolved into tears and said to his little friends: “Aren’t we Etruscan? Yes, we really are!” 7 The title of Champfleury’s article, L’École du calque (The School of Tracing Paper), revealed his derisive attitude toward these artists.

According to Champfleury, Ingres had encouraged them to study by tracing the bas-reliefs on the Pantheon: “Henceforth, members of the atelier in the rue de Fleurus sacrificed every morning to their own resemblance at the altars of the illusion, tracing and retracing. This method made them even more Etruscan than the vases bearing that name.” 8 Champfleury obviously believed that these artists were mere copyists who lacked any sense of originality or individuality. The critic Gautier, was, however, a significant ideological supporter who believed that Gérôme and his friends had reinvigorated and popularized history painting. His promotion allowed them to continue their work with a significant degree of popular success. The epicenter of the néo-grec movement relocated around 1855 from the rue de Fleurs to a studio complex known as la Boîte à thé (the tea caddy, a name derived from two Japanese figures decorating the building’s façade) at 70 Rue de la Madeleine. 9 Here they continued to organize regular gatherings, lively events frequented by various bohemian actors, musicians, and writers. The building became an important artistic and intellectual center.

Lecomte du Nouy himself credited Gérôme as a pioneer of the néo-grec: “Thanks to him, antiquity obtained a new life, he created the néo-grec genre, which was for many of us an abundant source of success.” 10 Lecomte du Nouy remained loyal to his teacher’s innovations, and some thirty years later, two critics still related his works to Gérôme’s

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9 For a more extensive description of the studio when Gérôme lived there, see Moreau-Vauthier 1906, p. 125-28. See also Whitely 1972, p. 151. For a photograph of the building see, Milner 1988, p. 213 fig. 268.

10 Montgailhard 1906, p. 27: “Grâce à lui, l’antiquité revivait d’une nouvelle vie; il créait le genre néo-grec, qui fut, pour beaucoup d’entre nous, une source abondante de succès.”

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little revolution. Edmond About, editor of *Le XIXe siècle* and a member of the conservative *Conseil supérieur des beaux-arts*, reviewed Lecomte du Nouÿ’s small 1876 triptych, *The Begging Homer* (Homère mendiant, fig. 77) as follows:

This intimate and tight work, as if sheltered in its little frame, inspires true devotion. It rejuvenated me some 20 years, reminding me of the studios at the rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs, in this noisy yet studious house, where Gérôme, Hamon, Picou, Isambert, four painters with quite unequal talents, reinvented Greek antiquity together. It was quite a bit modern, this antiquity of Gérôme and his friends: in their Athens there was a great deal of Pompei and a dash of Paris. But what faith! What fire! What taste and grace!¹¹

The critic Dubosc de Pesquidoux similarly referred to the artist’s predecessors in his discussion of Lecomte du Nouÿ’s eight works at the 1878 Exposition Universelle:

Lecomte du Nouÿ preserves the *néo-grec* traditions more faithfully than his teacher Gérôme. A long time ago, this small sect generated a strong agitation by reacting in their own way against the Romantics, a reaction that has succumbed to its own success. Lecomte du Nouÿ is one of the few disciples who adhere to the basic ideas, but not without modifying them according to his personal inspirations. Each of his pictures, based on purely ancient sources, is an original and piquant resurrection of vanished worlds. The artist retains from his master the somewhat dry precision, the slightly gray tonality, and the archeological science combined with picturesque research; all these qualities are acquired, wanted, and systematic. Less secure and less luminous than Gérôme, less quintessential and precious than Hamon, the two first leaders of the group, Lecomte du Nouÿ has like each of them a grand taste and a correct feeling for ancient times.¹²

Although Lecomte du Nouÿ did not belong to the original core group of *néo-grecs* (he was born almost a full generation later), Dubosc de Pesquidoux described him as a *néo-grec* painter with some justification.¹³ Many of the works the artist presented at the 1878 Exposition Universelle, such as *The Charmer* (fig. 29; cat. 54), *The Bearers of Bad Tidings* (fig. 82; cat. 64), *The Begging Homer* (fig. 77; cat. 105) and *Eros* (fig. 42; cat. 83), are somewhat unconventional historical subjects that fall into this stylistic

¹¹ About, cited from Montgailhard 1906, p. 120; for the French text see cat. 111. See also note 71. On About, see Bouillon 1990.

¹² Dubosc de Pesquidoux 1878, p. 24; for the French text see cat. 64.

¹³ See also Privat 1877, appendix V, in his review of *The Greek Sentinel* (cat. 11).
category. Further, in 1878 Lecomte du Nouy also moved to one of the ateliers at the Boîte à thé. If the néo-grec spirit in that building had rather faded by that date, the communal ambiance Gérôme and his fellow-artists had enjoyed there probably still prevailed among the many artists who still worked there. In the last instance, however, while the néo-grec was an important characteristic of his work, Lecomte du Nouy cannot be strictly classified as a second-generation néo-grec painter. The term seems too limited given that his Orientalist pictures were ultimately more prevalent in his total oeuvre. Yet, as will be argued later, these néo-grec paintings sprang from roots similar to those of his many Orientalist scenes.

*Archeology*

The development of the discipline of archeology, a crucial source of inspiration for néo-grec artists, was assisted by a series of significant events from the eighteenth century onward. A series of more or less scholarly excavations, most famously those at Herculaneum (1738) and Pompeii (1748), were often followed by lavishly illustrated scholarly publications describing the sites. The nineteenth century saw the development of further scientific knowledge of geology and a widening acceptance of the theory of evolution. The latter freed scholars from explaining human history according to the Biblical concept that the world was created only a few thousand years before the birth of Christ. Equally important—particularly for the new discipline of Egyptology—was Napoleon's expedition to Egypt (1798-1800), and the decoding of hieroglyphics in 1822 by Jean François Champollion (1790-1832). Another French pioneer in the field of Egyptology was Achille Constant Théodore Émile Prisse d'Avennes (1807-79), who, from 1836 through 1844, made drawings of Egyptian and Islamic monuments and published many illustrated books containing his observations, among them his famous *Les monuments égyptiens* (1847). Montgailhard recounts that Lecomte du Nouy visited

14 On the other hand, the artist had also submitted the more traditional history picture *Oedipus’s Farewell to Jocasta* (fig. 37), the Orientalist *The Dream of Cosrou* (fig. 88), and a somewhat bizarre genre scene *The Butchers of Venice* (fig. 40).

15 See also chapter I, p. 44 and note 116. The catalogue of both the 1878 Salon and the Exposition Universelle lists his address as rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs, 70 bis, whereas the 1877 Salon catalogue provides the address as rue des Beaux-Arts, 9.

16 For a general survey of the history of archaeology see Schnapp 1996.
Prisse d’Avennes, who lived in a house filled with Egyptian artifacts and gladly shared his knowledge. He also allowed the artist access to the plates for his books, illustrations which had a considerable influence on Lecomte de Nouy.

The cours d’archéologie at the École des Beaux-Arts

In addition to personal access to one of the great scholars of his time, Lecomte du Nouy had other means of learning about the classical past. The most important of these, perhaps, was the curriculum at the École des Beaux-Arts. The chief goal of the academic program at the École was to teach students how to draw, and ultimately how to paint, the human body; it was only in the accurate representation of the human figure that an appropriate narrative could be conveyed. To this end, students were also expected to study history, mythology, and the Bible. During the prix de Rome competition, for example, candidates had to begin their work as soon as they were informed of the particular subject to be treated. Once in the confinement of his individual studio, the competitor could no longer research or discuss the subject with anyone. It was therefore important to have internalized an extensive historical repertory in order to avoid mistakes that could disqualify one’s composition. To instill this knowledge, the École offered an extensive library, and everyone was required to attend a variety of classes. Students of painting not only followed courses in drawing, anatomy, and perspective, but also in aesthetics, the history of art, history, and archeology.

The cours d’archéologie was taught in the amphitheatre of the École, a horseshoe-shaped auditorium decorated in 1841 with an imposing wall painting by Paul Delaroche (1797-1856) titled the Hemicycle (L’hémicycle). It depicts seventy-five famous artists on either side of three enthroned figures of antiquity—the painter Apelles, the architect Ictinus, and the sculptor Phidias. At their feet a personification of Glory prepares to award the laurel wreaths of fame to a new generation of artists (detail fig. 60). This enormous painting was Delaroche’s reply to Ingres’s The Apotheosis of Homer (1827, fig. 61), and it was in the presence of this august work of art that students received their principal training about the civilizations of the past. In 1889 Alexis Lemaistre (dates unknown), a painter who had studied at the École, described the various courses taught,
and after citing many examples of the historical subjects covered, he mentioned that in
the month of June there were two sessions devoted to costume:

Models were chosen, whose type comes as close as possible to that of the people
represented; the professor orders a model to mount the table, and in the blink of an eye,
re-dresses them in a tunic or a toga […] and there is Cicero at the tribune, or Marius at
the ruins of Carthage […] ; and under applause of the whole amphitheatre, there is
Ramses with the straight tunic, glass beads, and the ibis head in his hair, or Vercingétorix
[...]. With every appearance, the students have a few minutes to make sketches. The
course we just described is the ideal course that the knowledgeable professor would
certainly like to continue. Unfortunately, the École, above all anxious to teach the
students the nude, has restrained this education: only the Greek, Egyptian, Assyrian, and
ancient Roman civilizations are brought in front of the painters’ and sculptors’ eyes. One
only teaches them how to clothe the antique, and they would have to search elsewhere if
they were to dress their figures in satin, velour, or brocades.17

The Role of Sculpture

Ancient sculpture—or at least the plaster casts made from it—— also played a
significant role in the understanding of classical art. Unlike painting of the time, ancient
sculptures had survived the centuries in great numbers, and their well-proportioned
human forms came to represent the very essence of the academic ideal. Ancient sculpture
served two main didactic purposes: it not only demonstrated perfect classical proportions,
but also provided many pieces of the historical and mythological puzzle. For example,
when Lecomte du Nouy attended Gérôme’s first class at the École in 1864, the model
was the antique statue of Germanicus.18 Though Gérôme presented the work primarily as
a form to be drawn, he may also have discussed the Roman general’s military deeds.
Further, plaster casts made tireless models and were readily available in different sizes.
Their light tone and three-dimensionality provided ideal surfaces for catching the
variations of light and shade a draftsman needed to convey volume. Like most artists,
Lecomte du Nouy is known to have purchased casts at the atelier de moulage of the

17 Lemaître 1889, p. 155-156.
18 See also chapter I, note 36. The sculpture is now believed to represent Augustus.
Louvre, including one of the *Venus of Milo* and of Michelangelo’s *Dying Slave.*

Photographs of the artist in his studio show these life-size casts with many other smaller statues (figs. 5–7).

Beyond anatomy, proportion, and historical information, sculptures also provided a formal source of inspiration for artists. As mentioned earlier, Lecomte du Nouy’s figure of Gilliat fighting with the monster in his painting *The Toilers of the Sea* (Les travailleurs de la mer, fig. 56) is reminiscent of the famous ancient marble sculpture of the *Laocoön.* The painter also seems to have used an alabaster portrait of Pharaoh Amenophis IV in the Louvre as the model for pharaoh’s face in *Ramses in his Harem* (fig. 102; cat. 201, and fig. 103). In addition, the plaster sculpture of *The Blind Belisarius Resting* (1791, fig. 62) by Antoine Denis Chaudet (1763-1810) might well have inspired the poses of the blind Homer and his young guide in both of his Homer paintings (figs. 77, 80). The bust of the blind Homer, the so-called Hellenistic blind type (fig. 63), which still exists in at least twenty-two copies after a Greek original, obviously influenced the facial features of the blind Homer in Lecomte du Nouy’s paintings. Since the Renaissance this head inspired many artists; Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832) eloquently described its emotional impact:

This sunken blindness, the inward bound vision strengthens the inner life ever more and completes the father of poets. Well-developed from endless speaking are these cheeks, these speaking-muscles, these trodden paths on which gods and heroes descend to the mortals; the willing mouth which is only the gate of such visions, seems to jabber like a child, and has all the naïveté of the first innocence; the hair and beard hides and honors the size of the head. Aimlessly, passionless rests this man, who is there for himself, and the world that fulfills him is his preoccupation and his reward.

Lecomte du Nouy must have known this bust from the copy in the ancient sculpture department at the Louvre. When he needed to represent the poet’s face in his Homer painting, where better to turn than to this famous image? William Bouguereau

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19 Rionnet 1996, p. 365. Lecomte du Nouy is recorded as having purchased the two plasters on November 25, 1878.
20 Judith Gautier, cited from Montgailhard 1906, p. 60-61; for the French text see cat. 201.
23 Louvre 1922, p. 26 no. 440, plate IX.
(1825-1905) made the same choice in his painting of *Homer and his Guide* (1874, fig. 64), as had many other artists. This bust of Homer was also one of the sculptures reproduced in the first volume of Charles Bargue’s drawing course for art students (Goupil’s *Cours de dessin*). Here the bust is rendered twice on a single sheet—once in a schematic and rudimentary form and again in a highly finished version (fig. 65). As Lecomte du Nouy provided several drawings after classical sculptures to be lithographed by Bargue for his course, one wonders if the Homer bust reproduced in Bargue’s book might have been yet another of his contributions to the publication. Even if he did not provide this particular drawing, he must at least have known all the plates that were finally involved in the publication. However, the Musée de Grenoble possesses a preparatory drawing of the Homer head in Lecomte du Nouy’s 1881 triptych, showing the same slight three-quarter view as in the final painting (fig. 66). This suggests the artist studied from a sculpture or cast that he could view from an angle, rather than from the *cours de dessin* plate, which provides a strictly frontal view.

But there were other historical objects, too, that artists used to evoke extinct civilizations, and Lecomte du Nouy’s work contains a range of such references. Judith Gautier has noted that the scepter with rock crystals in Hector’s hand, shown in the right wing of the 1881 Homer triptych (fig. 80), was based on an object discovered by archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann during his excavations of Troy. In the same area of the painting there appears a carved relief of Athena, which Lecomte du Nouy apparently adapted from a Hellenistic coin. Moreau-Vauthier informs us that the artist had discovered the lanterns depicted near the corpses in his painting *The Bearers of Bad Tidings* (fig. 82) while visiting the Boulacq Museum in Cairo. Similarly, his large painting of *Eros* (fig. 42) was, according to the catalogue of the Salon of 1874, inspired by an ancient gemstone. While we do not know the exact object Lecomte du Nouy used, such small ancient objects typically contain a figure in profile, like the painted eros. Yet little of the precious character of that object survives in Lecomte du Nouy’s grandiose picture, a reminder that historicist compositions always tread a fine line between academic evidence and artistic inventiveness.

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26 Moreau-Vauthier 1900, p. 22; for the French text see cat. 64.
Another example of how the imaginary and scholarly converged in the work of Lecomte du Nouy is demonstrated by one of the artist’s later, for him more atypical history paintings, *The Gallic Coast Guard* (Les gardes-côtes (Ancienne Gaule), 1888, fig. 67; cat. 218). Praised by the critic Alboize for the “type of his rude ancestors” and the painting’s wild barbaric aspect, the work shows four men and a dog guarding the rocky shore in pre-historic times.27 Lecomte du Nouy defined the Northern French locale by giving much attention to the rough sea and heavy mist, which the sun barely manages to pierce. The men’s bear-skin clothes, the wooden shields and a spear complete the historical setting. Montgailhard catalogued the painting in 1906 as belonging to the Musée archéologique de Saint-Germain-en-Laye (now called the Musée des Antiquités Nationales), to which it was donated in 1895 by Albert Le Roy, Conseiller Municipal of that city.28 This specific destination for the work seems to have been preconceived, implying that this illustration of early French history functioned primarily as a museological document rather than as a work of art in its own right. Only later was it transferred to an art museum, first the Louvre and presently the Musée d’Orsay. The painting is also a rare foray into Gallic times,29 as Lecomte du Nouy usually chose more recent episodes, such as Napoleonic subjects or the Franco-Prussian War, when depicting French history.30

“*Archeologists*” and Modernists

In 1876, when Lecomte du Nouy exhibited the first of his two Homer triptychs (fig. 77; cat. 105), the writer Edmond About called it “quite a bit modern, this antiquity of Gérôme and his friends.”31 About was referring to the novelty of the painting’s subject, as it was not a conventional depiction of a mythological theme, but a representation of the historical figure of Homer in a common genre scene. That same year, the critic Gabriel Marc analyzed several other painters with a predilection for reviving ancient cultures in a

28 Paris, Archives du Louvre (P8 1895, 23 Mars), six letters regarding the donation of “Un tableau de M. Lecomte-du-Nouy représentant une scène préhistorique.” Also, Montgailhard 1906, p. 64.
29 See also cat. 179.
30 A rare exception is a picture called *Les Guet-Apens, or Les Nervi* (1873, location unknown), which is set in the Middle Ages (cat. 82).
31 See also notes 11 and 71; for text see cat. 111.
historically accurate manner, calling them the “archeologists.” Although Marc saw these painters as the representatives of a new school, the concept, as we have seen, had existed for several decades. Despite the fact that Lecomte du Nouy’s name is not singled out in Marc’s discussion, the text still sheds light on this painter’s style of work and his artistic convictions:

ARCHEOLOGISTS. We have to note a new school that has accomplished its work alongside the modern idealists, of whom Jules Breton [1827-1906] seems to be the incontestable master. We will call it the school of the archeologists. This word suffices to indicate the differences of their methods. While Breton and his pupils try to express truth in its beauty and find their style in rural scenes, the archeological painters like Gustave Moreau [1826-1898], [Lawrence] Alma-Tadema [1836-1912], Hector Leroux [1829-1900], [Henri Paul] Motte [1846-1922] and many others, restore antiquity as it would have been, and therefore study ancient documents, vases, the works of art in our museums, the discoveries of Pompeii, and everything that can bring them on the track of customs, clothing, and apparel of the times that they want to revive. First of all they are scholars and some of them are also excellent painters. They are no longer pleased with the conventions of the school of David. The Greek columns, the tripods with three branches and the eternal drapery with straight pleats no longer suffice them. They need bizarre temples with unknown architectural elements, dresses beset with stones as the one of Salomé by Gustave Moreau, ancient ceremonies like the funeral of Themistocles by Mr. Leroux, or the most astonishing corporal punishments such as the prisoners of war being devoured by Baal in Babylon [The Moloch Baal Devouring the Prisoners of War in Babylon (fig. 68)]. Mr. Motte, the ingenious author of this latter painting, has placed himself for several years among the painters of this order. His large strange scene, in which slaves, warriors, women, and elephants march in a long procession in a special landscape towards the immense mouth of a granite monster, strikes the imagination and reveals a deep study, a foolproof patience, and a real talent for composition and color. But we permit ourselves a criticism that applies to this whole school. Life, movement, and passion are lacking from these works. The detail has until now absorbed the attention of their authors. They have amassed precious materials, and through research they have reconstituted the monuments, the aspects, and the costumes of distant ages; in a certain way they have rediscovered the envelope, the exterior of antiquity. Yet they fail to know how to animate it and make it alive. One painter will come by, who, using all his accessories, will depict purely, in a sumptuous and real décor, or in a true Oriental landscape, Homer’s heroes fighting before Troy, or the somber dramas of the family of the Atridae. He will have at his disposal all the elements that constitute the local color. He will only add something, a sigh, a spark, a nothing, genius.32

Here Marc delivered a thoughtful view of the state of contemporary art in the second half of the nineteenth century. He proclaimed Jules Breton the leader of the "modern idealists," probably because of the artist's socially aware depictions of rural life; this is quite an alternative perspective on an artist who is these days generally viewed as a thoroughly traditional painter. In contrast to the "idealists," the critic then singled out painters who aspired to revive antiquity, yet who also wanted to depart from the formal and generic principles of Neoclassicism, as David had defined it. Marc again selected a surprising group of representatives, including artist who are familiar today, like Moreau and Alma Tadema, as well as others, like Leroux and Motte, now all but forgotten. Yet even the pairing of the former seems unusual, as Moreau is now perceived as a singular symbolist whose works are far removed in style and spirit from the more straightforward, meticulously painted classical genre scenes of Alma Tadema. What united all the artists placed in this category by Marc, however, was their scholarly interest in their subjects. They all carefully researched ancient civilizations through surviving material and expanded upon this knowledge by infusing compositions with a multitude of unusual details most often rendered in a painstakingly illusionistic style. This strategy did not always receive unequivocal praise, and the artists were sometimes reproached for burying the main theme in minute details.

Tadéma, Hector Leroux, Motte e t beaucou p d'autres, reconstituent l'antiquité telle qu'elle devait être et pour cela étudient les documents anciens, les vases, les objets d'art de nos musées, les découvertes de Pompeï et tout ce qui peut les mettre sur la trace des moeurs, des costumes et des parures des âges qu'ils font revivre. Ce sont des savants d'abord et plusieurs sont aussi d'excellents peintres. Ils ne se contentent plus des conventions de l'école de David. Les colonnes grecques, les trépieds à trois branches et l'éternelle draperie aux plus droits ne leur suffisent plus. Il leur faut les temples bizarres aux architectures inconnues, les robes constellationées de pèlerinages comme celle de la Salomé de Gustave Moreau, les cérémonies anciennes comme les funérailles de Thémistoce de M. Leroux, ou les scènes plus étonnantes, comme celui des prisonniers de guerre dévorés par Baal, à Babylone. M. Motte, l'auteur ingénieux de ce dernier tableau, s'est classé depuis plusieurs années parmi les peintres de cet ordre. Sa grande scène étrange où les esclaves, les guerriers les femmes et les éléphants défilent en longue théorie, dans un paysage spécial, jusqu'à la bouche immense du monstre de granit, frappe l'imagination et révèle une étude approfondie, une patience à toute épreuve, un talent réel de mise en scène et de coloris. Mais on nous permettra une critique qui s'applique, du reste, à toute cette école. La vie, le mouvement, la passion manquent à ces œuvres. Le détail a jusqu'à présent absorbé l'attention de leurs auteurs. Ils ont entassé des matériaux précieux, ils ont reconstitué à force de recherches les monuments, les aspects, les costumes des âges reculés; ils ont en quelque sorte retrouvé l'enveloppe, l'extérieur de l'antiquité. Il leur manque de savoir l'animer et la faire vivre. Un peintre viendra qui, se servant de tous ces accessoires, représentera au naturel, dans un décor somptueux et réel, ou dans un vrai paysage oriental, les héros d'Homère luttant devant Troie, ou les sombres drames de la famille des Atrides. Celui-là aura à sa disposition tous les éléments qui constituent la couleur locale. Seulement il y ajoutera quelque chose, un soufle, une étincelle, un rien, le génie."
The "fini"

The high finish employed by most archeological painters was not merely a random aesthetic preference, but was based on a deeply rooted theoretical significance. In 1878 Dubosc de Pesquidoux argued that all of Lecomte du Nouÿ’s characteristics were “acquired, wanted, and systematical.” Art historian Albert Boime has explored the related concepts of correction and fini (degree of finish) in the context of the academic artist’s education as a draftsman. The classical ideal was best expressed in the perfectly rendered model; the néo-grec painter did not merely represent the human figure, however. He also included in his works ancient objects and architecture in order to construct a credible overall composition. Essentially, the visual recreation of the historic past called for intricate craftsmanship in order to make it more convincing to the viewer. The stone ruins of ancient civilizations were thus reconstructed and reanimated on canvas. Other elements that typified archeological paintings of this period, such as their often explicit depiction of barbaric violence, were also well served by meticulous craftsmanship. For example, the “most astonishing corporal punishments” presented in the Motte painting mentioned by Marc (fig. 68)35 conveyed more power in an apparently well-documented setting. The literally incredible nature of the subject, it was presumably reasoned, would best be anchored in a context of scientific truth; this would assist the viewer in suspending his initial disbelief and allow him to approach the work instead in a spirit of awe. A typical salon exhibition contained thousands of paintings and artists had to vie for attention. One way of doing so was to create violent, even gruesome, depictions intended to evoke emotions in the viewer of the kind stirred by horror movies today.

33 Dubosc de Pesquidoux 1878, p. 24; for French text see cat. 64.
34 Boime 1971, p. 33-34: “Conceptually, the correction was linked to the notion of perfection rooted in the admiration of antiquity. Correcting a drawing meant more than the adjustment to the lines to the model; it implied the adherence to classical proportions. Correction therefore denoted perfection – a criterion in drawing analogous conceptually to the fini, and therefore an intellectual preoccupation. Just as the fini served to demonstrate an artist’s knowledge of archeological details, so the ‘correct’ drawing demonstrated the draughtsman’s knowledge of classical works. This explains the Academic horror of strict observation of the model; when a pupil copied a figure’s ‘defects’ he committed a double sin in terms of Academic criteria: admitting ignorance of antiquity and rejecting the concept of correction.”
35 See note 32. For another of Henri Motte’s pictures that perfectly fits this category see his César s’ennuie (Ceasar is bored, 1882, oil on canvas, 229 x 328 cm, Musée d’art et d’histoire de Narbonne), which depicts the emperor being carried around, passing both imprisoned Christians as well as caged lions. Reproduced in Lepage 2002, no. 19, p. 36.
Lecomte du Nouy's *The Bearers of Bad Tidings* (fig. 82) is a perfect example of how sensational historical representations and traditional academic craftsmanship might effectively converge, and how such pictures often succeeded in capturing the attention of a large audience.

**Progress in Art**

As we have seen, Dubosc de Pesquidoux believed that the *néo-grecs* were rebelling against the Romantics, while Marc suggested that the "archeologists" were rejecting the conventions of the school of David. It seems, however, that the specific interest of these artists in the revival of ancient cultures represented a general reaction against previous artistic schools. The *néo-grecs* sought to communicate with contemporary viewers with their flamboyant approach to historical subjects as well as by the replacement of grand themes with more accessible genre scenes, making their paintings "quite modern" in About's eyes.36 Also significant in this respect are the words Lecomte du Nouy expressed after the death of his revered teacher Gérôme.37 Paraphrasing Lecomte du Nouy, for him, progress in art developed as if it were a succession of links within a chain, an evolution of alternating ideas, artistic schools, or formulas. He viewed Gérôme as the artistic heir of Paul Delaroche. It was Delaroche who had taught his pupil Gérôme (from 1840-43) to offer the public interesting and well-chosen, yet unfamiliar scenes, and to distill all their picturesque and dramatic potential by means of careful research. For example, Delaroche's *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey in the Tower of London in 1554* (1833, National Gallery, London) demonstrates how the artist created dramatic tension in his composition: it depicts the moment just before the protagonist's decapitation. Lecomte du Nouy then argued that, after Delaroche, Gérôme had nothing to contribute of his own to Romantic painting, and that he could not, and would not, imitate his teacher. Gérôme's own classical background drew him back to ancient art as a source, but he went to it with a desire to transform it. Gérôme thus invented a modern and lively historical genre that resonated better with his middlebrow

36 See notes 11 and 71, for the French text see cat. 111.
37 Montgailhard 1906, p. 25-27.
clients than the manner associated with purely academic formulas. In order not to be perceived as a pompier one had to revive an epoch with extinct individuals and know all the intimate details of the milieu in which they lived. Artiste pompier was the pejorative term applied to those who painted classical figures wearing helmets resembling those of a fireman (pompier). These artists supposedly worked in a neoclassical mode without inventiveness, and the term artiste pompier eventually came to be used for most artists working in the academic tradition. It is telling in this context that Lecomte du Nouy, who, in this day and age would almost certainly be considered the quintessential pompier, would have been greatly offended by this characterization.

Lecomte du Nouy’s discussion of Gérôme’s contribution to the evolution of art in the mid-nineteenth century raises the question of his own position within the larger artistic chain. Should he be considered the next transforming link after Gérôme, or as part of the same unit? Even though Lecomte du Nouy flourished a generation later, most contemporary critics would have argued for the latter because his name was so closely associated with that of his teacher. If, on the other hand, Lecomte du Nouy’s work indeed represented some kind of break from that of Gérôme, what distinguished it? And can this distinction be compared to that between Gérôme and Delaroche? In addition to certain stylistic differences, it might be argued, Lecomte du Nouy’s continuing attempts, successful or not, to paint large-scale narrative paintings are what set him apart from Gérôme. Gérôme seems to have been satisfied with creating small- to medium-size easel paintings, a strategy necessitated by his meticulous, time-consuming technique. Yet Lecomte du Nouy’s interest in creating large history paintings can hardly be regarded as a significant departure from his master’s philosophy, and ultimately remains fully within the boundaries of their shared academic approach to art. Moreover, when Lecomte du Nouy formed his ideas about artistic evolution, it was his very adherence to academic principles that prevented him from representing a distinct and innovative voice that might speak for a new generation. It seems, in fact, that he never sought such a role. What was important to him, however, was to be perceived as something more than a superficial

38 For two extensive discussions of the subject see Thuillier 1984, and Lécharny 1998.
39 Lecomte du Nouy’s admiration for Gérôme would never wane, as can also be witnessed by Carpeaux’s bust of Gérôme, seen standing on top of a clock in his studio taken late in his life (fig. 7).
painter, or a pompier, but rather, in his most ambitious works, at least, as an artist able to convey profound ideas.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, critics increasingly began to use the notion of artistic progress as a qualifier; and the concept of originality gradually took precedence over the traditional academic values of emulation and continuity. Thus, innovation became an intrinsic factor in the assessment of art, and each advancement in this regard was viewed positively by critics. When Gaston Schéfer, for example, wrote his assessment of Orientalist painting in 1882, he was already tired of the genre. This, he argued, was a natural result of the "bitter but necessary law of progress." Nonetheless, no matter how loud the voices of these champions of originality and progress were in the intellectual debate, the audience for art in general inevitably represented a wide range of tastes, enabling traditional artists to continue in their ways. Similarly, the introduction of néo-grec painting had taken place some thirty years before Marc wrote his 1876 assessment of the "archeologists," again indicating how influential the néo-grec phenomenon had been on a great number of artists. And although some néo-grecs may have perceived themselves as distinctly of their time, especially in contrast to the previous generation of grand history painters, for many critics their degree of innovation was not significant enough. Consequently, some attacks against the néo-grecs were fierce, and already in 1865, the painter-critic Gonzague Privat berated them for their conservatism:

As long as one only addresses ancient art as a tradition or an education, modern art can only gain from it; but if one returns to it as the principal goal of all research, if one requires it to the detriment of nature, if one still searches the ruins where it is still alive in order to find a more or less subtle subject, a more or less banal word-puzzle, a somewhat cold charade, instead of expressing what one has in one's head and one's heart, the art of our time will be stationary.

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40 Schéfer 1882, p. 177-78, for the French text see cat. 172; see also notes 106, 182.
41 Privat 1865, p. 10: "Tant que l'on ne s'adressera à l'art antique que comme à une tradition, à un enseignement, l'art moderne ne pourra qu'y gagner; mais lorsqu'on recourra à lui comme au but principal de toutes recherches, lorsqu'on le requerra au détriment de la nature, lorsqu'on fouillera les ruines au milieu desquelles il survit encore, afin d'y trouver un sujet plus ou moins subtil, un logogriphé plus ou moins banal, une charade plus ou moins froide, au lieu d'exprimer ce que l'on a dans la tête et dans le coeur, l'art de notre époque sera stationnaire."
This dismissal of historical painting, however, is far removed from Privat’s laudatory assessment in 1877 of Lecomte du Nouy’s art, including many paintings that conform entirely to the néo-grec characteristics.42

The concept of progress in art has so far emerged in these writings in different guises. Lecomte du Nouy’s own analysis referred to Gérôme’s development of néo-grec painting as a reaction against Delaroche. For Chaumelin, progress meant a parting from traditional academic conventions, and Privat specifically accused the “archeologists” of obstructing the advancement of modern art by not expressing emotions or feelings and caring too much for trivial details. Georges Lafenestre saw progress yet another way, interpreting it in terms of advanced technical skills. In his review of the 1868 Salon, he named Lecomte du Nouy but otherwise did not discuss his picture of Ajax (cat. 44). While discussing how the past, as well as specific historical masters, had inspired living artists, Lafenestre grouped Lecomte du Nouy with such other painters as Alma Tadema, Leroux, and Louis Frédéric Schutzenberger (1825-1903), describing them as artists who “interpret familiar antiquity, often with spirit, sometimes with grandeur.”43 By contrast, however, Lafenestre divided imitators of medieval art into two groups: the mechanical ones, producing with maniacal rigor the most bizarre aspects of an “infantile and imperfect art,” and those who intelligently represented the historic past by applying all means at their disposal, thanks to the subsequent “progress in art.” In other words, Lafenestre recognized a gradual progress in technical skills and was not too bothered by the fact that artists looked back to history for inspiration and subjects. That was undoubtedly Lecomte du Nouy’s approach, and several of his néo-grec works will now be discussed in greater detail, and in relation to their critical reception.

42 See Privat 1877, appendix V. A painter/critic Gonzague-Privat is listed in the artist’s dictionary by Bénézit as born in Montpellier in 1843 (unknown death date). He studied with Barrias, Dauzats, Lazarges and Dehodencq. He exhibited at the Salon and wrote reviews that were mainly published in L’événement, and in 1873 founded L’Art français. If this is indeed the same Gonzague Privat as the one who wrote the booklet Place aux jeunes! Causeries critique sur le Salon de 1865 (Paris 1865) from which the above quote derives, then he had drastically changed his mind about the néo-grec painters. In the 1877 article, he clearly praises Lecomte du Nouy’s work executed in a néo-grec style, and claims to be a personal friend of the artist. It should also be noted that Lecomte du Nouy painted a portrait of a certain G. Privat de Fressenel, and of Mlle Cécile Privat de Fressenel, and Léonce Privat de Fressenel. Could these have been relatives of the critic, and would that indicate a personal friendship or at least an acquaintance with Lecomte du Nouy? See cats. 212, 238, 239.

43 Lafenestre 1881, p. 40; for the French text see cat. 43.
Lecomte du Nouy conceived his first néo-grec painting, *The Greek Sentinel* (cat. 11), after reading Aeschylus’s trilogy, the *Oresteia* (458 BC). While the whereabouts of this painting are presently unknown, Guy de Montgailhard’s book on the artist includes an original engraving by Lecomte du Nouy with the same composition (fig. 69). Montgailhard also provided anecdotes concerning the genesis of this work, recounting that Gérôme’s young student immediately knew how he wanted to compose his subject and started an ébauche (the preliminary stage of a painting). His fellow students enthusiastically encouraged him to finish it, yet the artist was reluctant to spend the little money he had on hiring a model. Three friends then agreed to pose for him—Louis Loustaunau (1846-98) for the hands, Lehoux for the arms, and a third to model the clothing. At the 1865 Salon, the picture drew some attention and Privat called it Lecomte du Nouy’s breakthrough work:

It was quite a revolution in the néo-grec art, this little Greek guard, and the blow had an even stronger impact as the hand from which it came was trying for the first time. The public surrendered without second thoughts to this refined and frank art that spoke high and strong and seemed to delight in analysis, without risking being lost in minute detail. In fact, such fear would be puerile. So marvelously treated were the accessories, they retreated discreetly against the poetic theme that the artist had singled out, and did not call for attention until the mind was fully aware of the grandeur of this microscopic composition. The poet could say: “See here, the men from the divine bard of Ionia!” The archeologist would find the thousand chiseled details that revived antiquity only to his eyes, and the average man, who doesn’t see as far, or as close, would conclude that Mr. Lecomte du Nouty was simply an excellent painter whose work one would have to look for conscientiously at the next Salon. From this moment on he had made his mark.

Gautier praised the little work as “a pleasant invention, full of poetry and style. The size of two hands, but the equivalent of a history painting.” The archeologist Léon Heuzey, who had taught “l’histoire et les antiquités” at the École des Beaux-Arts since

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44 Montgailhard 1906, p. 15-16.
45 On Lehoux, see chapter I note 33. It is tempting to relate this passage to a detailed sketch for a hand surrounded by drapery in a private collection in Paris, see cat. 355.
46 Privat 1877; see appendix V.
47 Gautier 1865, p. 887; for the French text see cat. 11.
1863, provided Lecomte du Nouŷ with some detailed criticism of the armor.\textsuperscript{48} But this occurred after the fact, of course, and did not prevent the work from being bought by a certain Duc de Mouchy.\textsuperscript{49} The painter, photographer, and critic Maxime du Camp (1822-94) larded his review with the exact passage from the \textit{Oresteia} that had inspired \textit{The Greek Sentinel}: “God, I beg of you, free me of these chores; let me rest from this tiresome wake! All year round, like a dog, I guard atop the palace of the Atreidae, facing the nightly assembly of the stars. Regulators of the seasons for the mortals, brilliant kings of the world, torches of the heaven, I see them, these stars, when they disappear and when they rise. Incessantly I look for the flame signal, this bright fire that has to announce that Troy has fallen.” Du Camp greatly approved of this subject and had been waiting for a painter to translate it into a magnificent painting. Ultimately, however, it was not the small size of Lecomte du Nouŷ’s picture that prevented it, in his view, from being truly important. Rather, its weakness lay in the artist’s excessive interest in what he called “bric-à-brac”, and his insufficient exploitation of the psychological richness of the subject: the guard’s weariness, boredom, and apparently melancholy assessment of his own destiny. Nonetheless, du Camp judged it a promising attempt by the young artist:

There is here a preoccupation with archeological truth that deserves to be lauded; but as Lecomte du Nouŷ was in the mood for research, why did he stop halfway, and why did he engrave the bird consecrated to Minerva and emblem of Athens, on this stone merlon that belongs to a palace of Argos? The Argian half-wolf should have been there instead of the cute Athenian. It will be said: “This is of no importance”: I know it. Art is no science, I know that too, and I’m not confusing them. Still, it would have been fairly easy to be exact, the painting would have gained some archaic flavor, which would not have harmed it. Be it as is, in spite of these minor details this canvas is still honorable, and reveals in the author a curious and distinguished spirit. In all, it is rather a vignette than a painting; it’s a translation of Aeschylus \textit{ad usum Delphini}, but it is already something to be infatuated with such a poet; if it is not a result, it’s a good promise to keep in mind, and something to reckon with.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{49} This was probably Antoine de Noailles, duc de Mouchy (1841-1909).
\textsuperscript{50} Du Camp 1865, p. 668-669; for the French text see cat. 11.
The Invocation to Neptune (L’invocation à Neptune, 1866)

Lecomte du Nouy had his first official success with The Invocation to Neptune (fig. 70; cat. 26), which was awarded a gold medal at the Salon of 1866. This honor meant that his future Salon submissions did not have to be scrutinized by the jury. Gautier was deeply impressed by this little picture that had been inspired by the Homeric Hymns:

There is nothing to equal the mysterious solemnity of this antique scene. The statue of Poseidon, in the stiff style of Aegina, is seen from the back, trident in hand, and occupies the foreground so that we are facing the family who is sacrificing to the god in order that he will look kindly on the absent one, exposed to the perils of the sea. A young woman, clad in long white draperies, her hair held with a band, holds out a branch, and in calm but fervent attitude pronounces the sacramental words. Further back, an old woman in a cap decorated with strange designs seems to be repeating the words of the hymn. One is the wife, the other is probably the mother of the traveler; other members of the family, young people already growing up, are also beseeching help. Mr. Lecomte-Dunouy has a rare, deep feeling for the Antique. Although the small size of The Sacrifice to Neptune will mean that it will escape the attention of the crowd, it is nevertheless one of the most serious of the Salon.51

The critic and influential art official Charles Blanc (who would become Directeur des Beaux-Arts for a second time from 1870 through 1873) also described this painting as a “small work full of grandeur”. He further appreciated how the artist had “guessed the religious poetry of ancient sacrifices,” and how he had represented the magnificence of the interior of the temple, in spite of the fact that ignorant viewers would assume that such spaces would have been coldly symmetrical.52 Indeed, it was the artist’s skill in infusing life into antiquity that attracted people to such pictures in the first place.

Lecomte du Nouy might have been inspired here by a work from his former teacher Charles Gleyre, who was an important figure in the néo-grec movement. Gleyre’s painting Hercules and Omphale (1862, fig. 71) is also dominated by several large columns and a smaller one supporting a statue, architectural elements that serve as a

backdrop for the main characters in the foreground. Even if he did not know the work, a comparison of the two pictures demonstrates the ways in which Lecomte du Nouy tried to venture beyond such straightforward compositions. He abandoned the straight parallel placement of figures seen in Gleyre’s painting and heightened the drama by introducing an unseen light source that reduces the Neptune sculpture to a silhouette, casting strong shadows and a gloomy atmosphere over the rest of the composition. The smoke spreading from the tripod and the fraction of one person’s face visible through a cloth covering on her head give the finishing touches to this beautifully mysterious picture. A similarly haunting atmosphere is present in two small studies of heads, in which the artist created dramatic expressions by means of starkly contrasting light effects, one depicting an old woman wearing a veil (fig. 72; cat. 352), and the other a grisaille of a bearded man (fig. 73; cat. 353). In a broader comparison, *The Invocation to Neptune* recalls David’s *The Lictors Bringing to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* (1789, fig. 74), which shows similar compositional characteristics and treatment of light, especially in the left background. Inevitably, however, Lecomte du Nouy’s mystery did not seduce everybody. The critic Félix Jahyer called the painting very ordinary, and found in it “all the procedures of the école, the academic process, polished painting, and even that copied without grandeur.”

*The Madness of Ajax the Telamonian* (La folie d’Ajax le Télamonien, ca. 1867)

Another of Lecomte du Nouy’s early néo-grec pictures is *The Madness of Ajax the Telamonian* (cat. 43), which he exhibited at the 1868 Salon. Its present location is unknown, and a reproduction does not seem to exist. At the time, however, it was commented upon by several critics. Périer praised its concept and “the intense energy of terror and emotion that fills this grand little frame,” elements that made up for some dryness in the execution. He called it a picture without equal and an honor to its author and the whole school of Gérôme. One only needed to imagine it much larger, and it would be the most beautiful of grand history paintings, not only from the 1868 Salon but

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53 Even if Lecomte du Nouy did not know the work directly through his contact with Gleyre, the painting was also exhibited at Goupil’s in 1863, where he could have easily seen it. See Hauptman 1996, II, p. 436, no. 808.
54 Jahyer 1866; for the French text see cat. 26.
also in general! \(^{55}\) There were, however, some entirely negative reactions as well. Apart from providing extensive descriptions of this now-unknown composition, they illustrate the divergent views that shaped the discussion of contemporary art during this period. In his positive review of *Ajax* in *L'Artiste* Henry Houssaye argued that Lecomte du Nouy had managed to combine two scenes from the story in one painting, and for once he had even trumped Gérôme in the clever way he conveyed “barbarity and primitive rudeness”:

[There was] the scene where the hero, leaving his tent, perceives his fatal illusion, and the scene where he, alone at the seashore, will strike himself with his sword. So Ajax is in his tent, one destined to withstand the winds and rain of a nine-year siege, solidly constructed with planks and wooden joists, covered with skins and rough linen fabrics. At his feet lie the bloody heads and corpses of the butchered sheep, calves, lambs, and rams. The son of Telamon looks mournfully at the victims of his insanity. He leaves his delirium; ashamed of his mistake he amply covers his head with his wide chlamys as he feels unworthy of the sunlight. He searches for his sword on the ground in order to pierce his chest and cries in a grievous voice: “**Unfortunate! I let these cursed Atridae escape from my hands to throw myself on calves and bleating lambs, and I bathed in their blood!** (Sophocles, *Ajax*).” \(^{80}\) [The phrase in italics was also published in the Salon catalogue.] Behind him rises Athena, all in arms, lit by a supernatural glow, majestic as Hera, implacable as Erinyes. Still annoyed by Ajax’s blasphemy, the goddess furiously followed him until the hour of his passage; she touches his head with her finger to push him even further ahead in his despair, to dedicate him to the punishment of the somber Tartar. In the background, near the gate, a group of Salamisian warriors sadly watch the delirium of their king, and the captive of Ajax, Tecmessa, sits on a stool, shattered by grief. Once one has seen this canvas, one remembers it for a long time. It is impossible to better understand and express the grandeur, poetry, and the tragedy of Sophocles’s drama. Like Gérôme, Lecomte du Nouy not only possesses a knowledge of antiquity but also a feeling for it. Although his manner of painting is derived from that of Gérôme, he remains powerfully original; his work contains a barbarity and primitive rudeness that the painter of *King Candaulus* \(^{[1859, Museo de Arte, Ponce, Puerto Rico]}\) and *The Gladiators* \(^{[1859, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven]}\) has never expressed. If the Greeks of Agamemnon were to be reborn, they would want to be painted by Lecomte du Nouy; if the Greeks of Pericles were to be reborn, they would want to be painted by Gérôme. If one searches for an artist worthy of illustrating the *Iliad* he is found in Lecomte du Nouy. We don’t want to leave *The Madness of Ajax* without again admiring these Salamisian warriors; there are some seven or eight, and each has a different type and is profoundly accentuated; each expresses a different sentiment, either of sadness or amazement. The captive is adorably beautiful in her attitude of tiredness and sorrow. However great the majesty of Athena, we prefer Ajax and the other figures to the goddess. The bluish glimmer that envelops her

\(^{55}\) Périer 1868, p. 47-48; for the French text see cat. 43. On Périer see also chapter I, note 66.
gives her the diaphanous aspect of a specter. One believes her to have been illuminated by electric light. Such effects are usually left to the operators of fairy-tale theaters.\(^{56}\)

Jules Joly Grangedor, an advocate of traditional aesthetics and a photographer of antiquities, seconded this view and saw nothing outmoded about the subject, calling it a commentary on a literary text of a “completely modern taste.”\(^{57}\) He commended Lecomte du Nouÿ for conveying in such a small space both his sincere aspirations and a grand design—the traditional measuring rods for evaluating history paintings. Yet he criticized the goddess’s marble-like appearance, which he felt was better suited to a white phantom in a medieval legend than to a classical figure. He warned that when the impossible and the conventional meet in a heroic composition they should not clash with verisimilitude and illusion, which he saw as necessary to any complete representation of real life. Lecomte du Nouÿ, and many other artists like him, needed to distinguish between the beauty of form and its pure picturesque character. Gautier, on the other hand, termed the depiction of the enraged goddess truly superb and of a highly poetic quality.\(^{58}\)

Outright disparagement came from Marius Chaumelin, whose deeply felt objection to some of Lecomte du Nouÿ’s later works was cited in Chapter One. He argued strongly against the widespread taste for archeological painting, and he undoubtedly represented the opinion of many in avant-garde circles. His criticism, centered here on Lecomte du Nouÿ’s *The Madness of Ajax the Telamonian*, is worth quoting at length. Not only does it give a very different description of the work, but it also puts the *néo-grec* genre in a broader cultural context by establishing parallels with literature and the performing arts:

The heroes of antiquity are not better treated than those of the First Empire [referring to Napoleonic subjects he had previously discussed]: the cripple Scarron would applaud the travesties that inflect the fantasy of our archeological painters. For us, more surprised than astonished by such irreverence, we ask ourselves how it is possible that the Society of Dramatic Authors allows painting to so encroach on theater. Still, she would not know how to hide: the painters cunningly pillage the popular pieces. Lecomte du Nouÿ, for example, has appropriated one of the most extravagant types of *la Belle Hélène* [the 1864 Jacques Offenbach operetta]. Lecomte du Nouÿ is the best pupil of Gérôme: like his

\(^{56}\) Houssaye 1868, p. 323-324; for the French text see cat. 43.
\(^{57}\) Grangedor 1868, p. 512-14; for the French text see cat. 43. On Grangedor, see *La Chronique des Arts et de la Curiosité* (supplement to the GBA), (December 10, 1871), p. 5-6.
\(^{58}\) Gautier 1868, p. 628; for the French text see cat. 43.
master, he graces himself with literature; "Of the old authors he had all the intelligence / And he knows Greek, madam, as well as anyone in France. Greek! O Heaven! Greek! — Greek! What a delight!" If we remember correctly, Lecomte du Nouy made his debut at the Salon of 1865, with a translation of Aeschylus The Greek Sentinel, drawn from the Oresteia); the following year, he received a medal for The Invocation to Neptune; today he tackles Sophocles, and in a small picture, on which frame he inscribed a passage of this poet, he unfolds the following scene: Ajax, son of Telamon, the invincible Ajax, has just massacred in his room—where he has gathered them—innocent calves and bleating lambs, that he mistook for the Atridae; all of a sudden he realizes his mistake and, taken by a justified disgust, he widely opens his eyes, tremblingly drapes himself in his coat and presses himself against the wall; a gigantic woman, white and gloomy as the statue of the Commander [from Mozart’s Don Giovanni], carrying a spear in her hand, a helmet on her head, and an owl on her shoulder—you will have recognized Minerva—descends from the ceiling in the midst of fireworks, and presses her heavy hand on the forehead of the Telamonian. The kinsmen of the latter, his friends and slaves, placed in the rear coulisse, look stupefied at these events...; they wait to see the hero disappear through a trapdoor. Lecomte du Nouy would like us to believe that he discovered in Sophocles this slayer of Ajax in a room, this gigantean, whom he performs a pose blanche, these fireworks and these anodine supernumeraries. We don’t fall for it. The extras and accessories are taken from the comic theater; the Minerva is perhaps a papier-mâché caryatid detached from some temple of wisdom—from the palace of the legislative body, for example—but certainly, the Ajax is the martial idiot that we have seen in la Belle Hélène. This whole scene is a heroic joke. The author of The Madness of Ajax the Telamonian will forgive us the somewhat crude frankness of these observations: he is young, he draws well, and will know how to free himself of this meager and smooth touch that he borrowed from his master; he has a laudable ambition, enough elevate himself above banality; he read in Horace that the ivy crown that edifies wise foreheads, doctorum ederae praemia frontium, gives man immortality, and that, in order to not be confused with the masses, there is nothing to do but frequent the sacred forest, to watch the nymphs and satyrs dance, and to evoke the shades of the heroes... All that is certainly quite nice, but even the slightest grain of life, some reality, would be better. And why do we import Atridae, Ajax, Ulysses, Achilles, and other antediluvian men, for whom we would not have enough ropes or gallows if they were to come back today! For too long did these heroes drag their buskins and bestial passions on the stage. Literary Romanticism has banished it from the theater; So where do those who keep a remnant from the classical domination of painting still come from? “It’s David’s fault!” cry those long-haired painters who eagerly forget that Delacroix has painted Bacchus, Orpheus, Ariana, Medea, Andromeda, and many other gods, half-gods, and heroes from antiquity. No, my friends, it is no more the fault of David than that of Delacroix. It is the fault of the inconsequent audience that yawns at a tragedy from Racine and tolerates the tragedy by the first smearer that comes along. It’s the fault of the attested critics who carefully describe these tragic-comic pictures, and who pretend that it’s great art. It’s the fault of the amateurs who buy such rubbish, only to relegate them into a corner of their room and to never look at them again. It is the fault of Alexandre Dumas fils, who is to have bought Fromentin’s Centaurs [Salon 1868, Musée du Petit Palais, Paris], he who knows very well that Marco is worthy
of Laïs, that not every rake has ram’s feet, and that on the racetrack one still sees some man-horses.  

Chaumelin not only had little positive to say about the painting and its author—although he did recognize the author’s technical ability—he also faulted anyone who created a receptive environment for such works. To Chaumelin, Lecomte du Nouy’s historicizing paintings represented all that was despicable in the art of his time, not only in painting but also in literature and in theater; he called upon everyone to move ahead rather than stare back into the past.

**Painting and the Theater**

Like many other art critics in this era, both Houssaye and Chaumelin employed theatrical references in their reviews. Parallels between painting and the stage were drawn into their discussions of works by Lecomte du Nouy and other artists working in the same manner. Indeed, most French critics of the period wrote not only about painting and sculpture, but also reviewed concerts, plays, and operas. Many wrote fiction, too, and Jules Claretie even became administrator of the Comédie-Française. In short, nineteenth-century critics saw closer connections between the various artistic disciplines than critics generally do today. Theatrical analogies in art reviews were easily understood by readers, and were used by critics to underscore the illusionary elements of the historical scenes with which artists tried to lure viewers. Theatrical references in reviews, however, sometimes hinted at the often inferior quality and execution of illusionary stage sets. Yet beyond the obvious parallel between easel paintings and painted backdrops there was also a link to certain subjects; many operas and plays presented the same narratives as salon history paintings. Chaumelin, however, viewed compositions by Lecomte du Nouy and his circle as the equivalent of the light entertainment provided by an operetta.

Most significantly, perhaps, some critics also acknowledged that specific painted compositions and theatrical productions could successfully create wonderful illusions for audiences eager to be seduced, yet perfectly well aware of the artifice inherent in them. This evident link between narrative painting and the performing arts eventually

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50 Chaumelin 1873, p. 124-26, for the French text see cat. 43.
encompassed the art of cinema. Many directors of early silent films, especially when creating historical costume dramas, were directly inspired by the work of artists like Gérôme (for example, Enrico Guazzoni’s [1876-1949] 1913 gladiator movie Quo Vadis?). One can argue that, when academic painting eventually succumbed to modernist aesthetics and abstraction, the narrative convention evolved in film, which has continued the tradition of visual storytelling on a two-dimensional surface.

*Demosthenes Practicing his Declamation* (Démostène, au bord de la mer, s’exerçant à la parole, 1870)

In 1872, at the first salon organized after the Franco-Prussian war (1870-71), Lecomte du Nouy exhibited not only his sensational *Bearers of Bad Tidings* (fig. 82) but also the more modest painting *Demosthenes Practicing his Declamation* (fig. 75; cat. 58). Demosthenes (384-322 B.C.), the greatest of Athenian orators, supposedly overcame his speech disorder by speaking with pebbles in his mouth and accustomed himself to the racket of the popular assembly by declaiming on the seashore against the noise of wind and waves. Surprisingly enough, it is with this rarely treated subject that the artist’s style and artistic approach can be directly compared to one of the great French painters of an earlier generation, Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863). Delacroix first incorporated Demosthenes within a larger decorative project for the Chamber of Deputies in the Palais Bourbon in Paris, which he finished in 1847. Then he reworked the subject into an easel painting in 1859 (fig. 76); Lecomte du Nouy is likely to have seen one or both versions. When Gautier reviewed Delacroix’s painting at an 1860 exhibition, he was most impressed with the rendition of the natural elements: “One of the best marine paintings I have ever seen. It is apparently a study from nature, to which the artist later added the classical figure to make the painting. The sea ripples, breaks, foams, crashes, and does its best to present the voice of the orator.”

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61 Lecomte du Nouy also depicted a small bronze statue of Demosthenes in the portrait of Adolphe Crémieux (fig. 47) as a symbol of the sitter’s great oratory skills.  
63 Idem, cited in English translation.
Whether or not he was conscious of Delacroix's versions of the subject, however, Lecomte du Nouy took a very different approach. For him this was not an excuse to paint the dramatic effect of rough waves pounding on the shore under a gloomy sky, but rather an attempt to make a convincing likeness of a person known to posterity only through written sources. The challenge lay especially in re-animating a personality whose dramatic gestures had ensured the lasting reputation of his oratory skills. This image, like all of Lecomte du Nouy's historical compositions, had to open a window on the past. In keeping with his academic training, the artist included carefully depicted details of anatomy and drapery and suggested a context with the outlines of an ancient city in the background.

Understandably, most of the critical attention at that year's salon went to Lecomte du Nouy's more outrageous submission, *The Bearers of Bad Tidings* (fig. 82), and only Georges Lafenestre discussed *Demosthenes* seriously. After praising Lecomte du Nouy's technique, he compared him to Gérôme, who had taught him well. Lafenestre's only reservation was that perhaps the highly finished technique of *The Bearers of Bad Tidings* did not completely suit Gautier's florid literary style. When he subsequently discussed *Demosthenes*, he argued that:

Mr. Lecomte du Nouy shows himself no less able in his *Demosthenes practicing his Declamation* at the seashore, but there too [he] battles a tremendous memory, that of Eugène Delacroix, who treated the subject twice, in a freer rendition with the sympathetic passion of an emotional poet and the ardent imagination of a great painter. Erudition that takes no lively, colorful, expressive form is a sterile quality. Some painters are like women; it is not bad when they are knowledgeable, but if that knowledge kills the emotion, enthusiasm, simplicity, nature and charm, then the hell with science. A little foolishness is a thousand times more preferable.64

In this misogynistic analogy, Lafenestre points to what he sees as Lecomte du Nouy's lack of emotional power, an element so clearly expressed by Romantic artists like Delacroix. The critic regretted the countless shallow historicizing scenes being churned out by a tremendous number of artists, whatever era they tried to re-create. In order to succeed with historical genre painting, he claimed, one needed the genius of a Gerard Terborch (1617-1681) or an Ernest Meissonier (1815-1891), two champions of genre

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64 Lafenestre 1881, p. 266-268; for the French text see cat. 64.
painting with enormous technical skill, even though Terborch did not depict historical subjects. One cannot dispute such a viewpoint, which should in fact be applied to all artists, regardless of their style. Not every Romantic painter could rise to the level of Delacroix, nor could every Impressionist rival Monet. Within the parameters of Lecomte du Nouy’s chosen manner, however, while he was perhaps not entirely equal to Gérôme either in technical or compositional skill, he certainly came close. Ironically, this quality earned him the opposition of some critics who felt he was not original enough.

_The Two Homer Triptychs_

Given the character of his subsequent works, Lecomte du Nouy seems to have been unaffected by the attacks of critics like Chaumelin. He painted several more néogrec pictures, with considerable success, before shifting to Orientalist themes (a path taken by Gérôme before him). Almost a decade after _The Madness of Ajax the Telamonic_, Lecomte du Nouy seems to have risen to the challenge presented to him by Houssaye in _l’Artiste_— that he illustrate Homer’s _Iliad_. Careful analysis of Lecomte de Nouy’s two triptychs showing the begging Homer yields further insights into his approach to archeological painting, and also clarifies his position in the art world of his time. The larger-than-life-size second version of this subject generated an enormous number of reactions, illustrating then current debates about contemporary art, and about history painting in particular.

_The Begging Homer (Homère mendiant, 1875)_

According to mythology, Homer, the blind and destitute ancient Greek poet, wandered from town to town guided by a shepherd boy, reciting verses and playing his lyre to survive. Rather than depicting a glorious moment of performance, as a more traditional history painter might have done, Lecomte du Nouy focused on the very

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65 See note 59.
66 See note 56.
67 For a more traditional depiction of the subject see Paul Jourdy’s painting _Homer Reciting His Poems_ (1834, Paris, Ecole des Beaux-Arts); repr. in Grunche 1984-85, p. 87.
human aspects of Homer’s poverty, an approach in keeping with the painter’s néo-grec
taste. The location of the 1875 triptych is unknown, but its composition was recorded in a
photogravure published by Goupil & Cie (fig. 77; cat. 105). Although he clearly invented
his composition, the artist turned for inspiration to Ingres, and probably to Gérôme as
well. In 1827 Ingres had painted his famous *Apotheosis of Homer* (fig. 61), and in 1858
Gérôme included Homer in a decoration for the grand Pompeian House of Prince
Napoleon; as in Lecomte du Nouy’s work, one panel depicted Homer, and the other two
the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* respectively (figs. 78, 79). Ingres’s large canvas originally
adorned one of the ceilings in the nine new galleries at the Louvre, known as the Musée
Charles X and dedicated to the display of Egyptian and Etruscan antiquities. Ingres
showed Homer enthroned before a temple, flanked by personifications of the *Iliad* and
*Odyssey*, and receiving tribute from forty-six great historical figures. The most concrete
link between Ingres’s and Lecomte du Nouy’s paintings is established by the two
personifications. The latter distinguished his treatment of the theme from that of Ingres
by shifting each personification to a separate wing and transforming them into more
monumental, standing figures.

Given the similarity of other elements of Lecomte du Nouy’s version to that of
Gérôme, it is reasonable to assume that he was familiar with his master’s painting of this
subject (figs. 78, 79). As a subtle reference to Ingres, he retained the attributes of the
personifications: the *Iliad* holds a sword and the *Odyssey* an oar. Like Ingres, Lecomte du
Nouy also used Greek script to identify individual figures. However, he not only isolated
these figures in separate wings, he also expanded their allegorical significance. The *Iliad,*
for example, tramples the head of Hector, raising a sword before an altar dedicated to
Troy (the *Iliad* ends with the funeral of the Trojan hero, Hector.). The sun above reads
ΦΟΙΒΟΣ (Phoebos, meaning bright, or shining) in reference to the god Apollo. The
*Odyssey,* on the other hand, appears veiled in the palace of Odysseus, under the crescent
moon of EKATH (Hecate), the goddess of sorcery active at night. He also shows
Penelope, faithfully awaiting her husband’s return, refused to marry any of her suitors

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68 On the Pompeian House, see note 4; for the Gérôme paintings, see Ackerman 2000, p. 237, cat. nos. 84-85. The *Homer* is recorded as being lost, but was described by Gautier in *L’Artiste* of 1858, p. 18. Gérôme
also painted *Le Siècle d’Auguste* (1855, Amiens, Musée de Picardie), which is clearly related to Ingres’
1827 painting (see Ackerman 2000, cat. nos. 64, 64.2).
until she finished the perpetual work on her father-in-law's shroud, depicted in the basket behind her. The three receding columns on the right wing of the painting are also reminiscent of those in the temple of Ingres's Apotheosis of Homer.

In the central panel showing the mendicant Homer, Lecomte du Nouy's composition differed most distinctively from Ingres's precedent. Rather than glorifying Homer by having him tower over his disciples, the artist depicts the poet in a more personal and humble, even intimate, manner. The shabbily dressed old man rests against a well, turning his blind eyes upward and clutching his cane. His companion, exhausted after a long day of guiding his master, sleeps comfortably at his side, holding the bowl in hope of alms. Allegorically, the boy can be read as the genius of poetry leading the blind poet, a common representation of inspiration.69

When About reviewed Lecomte du Nouy's 1875 Homer triptych, he claimed it transported him back to the epicenter of the néo-grec movement, the Boîte-à-thé studio:

This intimate work, tight and as if sheltered in its little frame, inspires true devotion. It rejuvenated me some 20 years, reminding me of the studios at the rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs, in this noisy yet studious house, where Gérôme, Hamon, Picou, Isambert, four painters with quite unequal talents, together reinvented Greek antiquity. It was quite a bit modern this antiquity of Gérôme and his friends: in their Athens there was a great deal of Pompeii and a dash of Paris. But what a faith! What fire! What taste and grace! This revolution behind closed doors has not been sterile; there still remain masterpieces. The antiquity of the rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs lives again in the painting by Mr. Lecomte du Nouy, in its allegorical figures draped as Rachel [70], symbolizing the Iliad and the Odyssey, in the ingenious and delicate group of the old man and the child, in the terraces, in the porticoes and frontons of the Greek city asleep, in the ingenious arrangement, in the delicate drawing, in the sobriety of colors, in the finish, to thus say superfluously, in painting. A small work of long breath, a work of ardent and delicious patience, which one does not create for a dealer, nor for an amateur, nor for the success at the Salon, but for oneself, per suo diletto, or for the beautiful eyes of a woman one loves.]71

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69 See, for example, the marble relief of this subject by the American sculptor Edward Sheffield Bartolomew (1822–1858) made in Rome in 1851 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art), discussed and reproduced in Tolles 1999, no. 38. A compositional and thematic kinship between Lecomte du Nouy’s Homer paintings and David’s Belisarius (1781, Lille, Musée des Beaux Arts, and a smaller replica in the Louvre) could also be established.

70 As discussed earlier, critics often made reference to the theater. The Rachel mentioned here was the hugely famous dramatic actress who died in 1858 and was portrayed by countless painters. See Régine Bigorne, “Visions of Antiquity,” in: Gérôme & Goupil 2000, p. 103, and, Anne Chossegros, “Rachel, une héroïne antique, une larme d’orient,” in: Orientalistes 2001, p. 73-84.

71 About, cited from Montgailhard 1906, p. 120; for the French text see cat. 111, and note 11. On the Boîte-à-thé studio, see note 9.
In the two lines critic Charles Yriarte devoted to this painting in his 1876 Salon review, he described Lecomte du Nouy as “a real talent,” and made the somewhat common observation that he ought to put greater distance between himself and his three teachers: Gleyre, Gérôme, and Signol. Dubosc de Pesquidoux saw the 1875 Homer triptych as another example of a carefully handled painting that “pleases the public because of its novelty, and the artists and those well educated because of the effort and knowledge that the painter reveals.” Another, unidentified, critic could not find anything positive to say about the triptych, calling it one of those puzzles that appear annually at the salon: “Lecomte du Nouy has set himself the task of chilling down Ingres, and he has tried to adapt the solemn figures of the Iliad and the Odyssey in the manner of Gérôme, two beautiful images that he has ruined for us. That is inexcusable, and what is even worse is that he has followers. Mr. Motte and [Gustave] Courtois [1853-1923] while following his unfortunate examples, begin to make indecipherable rebuses.” With this attack on Motte we come full circle, as Marc praised this ally of Lecomte du Nouy an “ingenious author” when discussing his Moloch Baal Devouring the Prisoners of War in Babylon (fig. 68) it in the context of the “Archeologists.”

The Begging Homer (Homère mendiant, 1881)

In 1881, Lecomte du Nouy revisited The Begging Homer, this time using a much bigger format and introducing many compositional changes (fig. 80; cat. 160). Lecomte du Nouy’s large pictures were materially expensive, consumed a great amount of time, and were more difficult to sell than easel paintings. Yet he was determined to make this triptych and sustain the legacy of his idol Ingres and to underscore his own significance as an artist. This painting is without doubt the finest surviving example of Lecomte du Nouy’s large-scale history paintings (his Victor Hugo cycle of the mid-80s, fig. 56-59, was lost in a fire), and it is a key to understanding his artistic accomplishments.

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72 Yriarte 1876 (I), p. 720; for the French text see cat. 105.
73 Dubosc de Pesquidoux 1878, p. 25; for the French text see cat. 64.
74 Anonymous 1876, p. 2; for the French text see under cat. 111.
75 See note 32, where Motte’s painting is reviewed quite positively.

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In addition to being much larger than the 1875 triptych (fig. 77; cat. 105), the most notable variation in the artist’s 1881 treatment of the subject appears in the wings. These still depict the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but their positions are reversed. At first glance, the 1881 *Odyssey* much resembles its predecessor, but this time the female figure is more specifically identifiable as Penelope. Still dressed in white and with her face covered, she holds a portrait of Ulysses, as well as the bow that only he could string, as opposed to the more generic oar that appears in the first version. Argus, Ulysses’s loyal old dog, also alludes to Penelope’s faithfulness. The artist had employed similar symbolism in *Love that Goes, Love that Remains* (fig. 23), and in an 1864 painting titled *The Loyal Dog* (*Le chien fidèle*, cat. 7). The *Iliad* on the right wing of this later Homer triptych, on the other hand, represents a complete departure from the first version: it is a vigorous scene showing the corpse of Hector lying before the Trojan throne, naked except for the pectoral armor of Patroclus. The scepter in his hand was apparently inspired by a Trojan object excavated by Schliemann around 1870.⁷⁶ Above the corpse hovers the goddess of war with her torch, while the gods observe the drama from Mount Olympus.

One explanation for Lecomte du Nouy’s reversal of the two wings may be his retaining of the three receding columns, which visually reinforce the ornate gilt frame that holds the triptych’s canvasses within two sculpted, inscribed columns. The inscription carved on the left-hand column, *Batpaxomyomaxia* (combat of the frogs), refers to a parody of the *Iliad* from a later date called the *Batrachomyomachie* (the war between the frogs and the rats). The inscription on the right reads *YMNNOI* and *ΕΠΙΓΡΑΜΜΑ* (hymns and epigrams).⁷⁷

The central panels of 1875 and 1881 depicting Homer seem similar at first glance, yet careful comparison reveals important changes. The well behind Homer and the entire pavement in the earlier version have been replaced in the later one by an urban landscape with rough soil. A wildly dramatic sky over the Acropolis has superseded the serene sunset of the first version, and a torch-lit interior at left introduces some warm tonal contrasts. A lyre constructed from a pair of antelope horns and a turtle’s carcass has taken

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⁷⁶ Judith Gautier 1886; for the French text see cat. 160.
⁷⁷ See *Polyptiques* 1990, cat. no. 35.
the place of the elaborately decorated wooden instrument, and Homer’s smooth walking stick has become a rough tree branch. These changes seem to indicate Lecomte du Nouy’s desire to create a greater sense of “authenticity” and ruggedness in the second version that is better suited to the subject. Of greatest importance, however, is the transformation of the figural group. The positions of Homer and his young companion have hardly changed, yet their seemingly smooth garments in the first version have been transformed into animal skins and roughly woven rags in the second, and, significantly, these cover much less of their bodies. All of these elements, especially the meticulous rendition of Homer’s wrinkled skin, gave the 1881 triptych a much grittier atmosphere than its predecessor’s. The transformation from the smaller 1875 painting to this enormous salon machine epitomizes Lecomte du Nouy’s evolving attitude toward the status of contemporary history painting in the grand manner. The work remains firmly grounded in the academic tradition, but is also distinctively néo-grec as its main canvas depicts what is essentially a genre scene.

Lecomte du Nouy first exhibited this large triptych at the 1882 Salon; four years later both versions appeared together in a solo exhibition at Galerie Tripp in Paris. At the Salon, the critic Eugène Montrosier was less than overwhelmed: “Mr. Lecomte du Nouy presents us with the larger second version of a triptych that we saw at the Salon several years ago. He very uncommonly praises the misery of the old Homer and his eternal glory. But, as Bassecourt from Les Faux Bons Hommes said, one senses too much the pupil of Gérôme. A lot of work and learning, an effort not without grandeur; but warmth, passion or life, none.”

The anonymous critic of l’Événement, could not guess if this salon exhibit would cause a sensation, but called it a strong and honest work, of the kind that traditionally brought great acclaim to its creator. In the central panel, he argued, the artist ventured into total realism, evocative of seventeenth-century Spanish painting. In the two wings “the palette cedes to the dessin. We leave Ribera in order to find Ingres, two masters with

78 A similar wooden lyre is being offered to Homer in Ingres’ painting (fig. 61), as well as in Gérôme’s 1848 Anacreon, Bacchus et l’amour (Toulouse, Musée des Augustins), repr. in Ackerman 2000, cat. 19.
79 See appendix IV.
80 Montrosier 1882, p. 27-28; for the French text see cat. 160. Bassecour [sic for Bassecourt] mentioned in this review is a character in the comedy by Théodore Barrière and Ernest Capendu Les Faux Bonshommes (published in 1856).
whom Lecomte du Nouy fraternizes through the sole power of his talent."\textsuperscript{81} The depiction of the figure of Homer bearing all the signs of his venerable age is indeed strongly reminiscent of Juan de Ribera’s famous saints and hermits. In the same context, the critic Charles Clément praised Lecomte du Nouy’s conception and execution, but could not quite identify the corpse represented in the \textit{Iliad} wing. His main objection, however, was Lecomte du Nouy’s rendering of Homer as a figure lacking grandeur or beauty. To Clément it seemed unnecessary for the artist to have “stressed all the ugliness and deformities produced by old age and the miseries of life.”\textsuperscript{82} He also felt that Lecomte de Nouy had been unable to resist the influence of Léon Bonnat’s (1833-1922) popular \textit{Job} (fig. 81) of 1880. Bonnat, whose predilection for the realism of Spanish Old Masters like Ribera is well known, depicted the biblical figure virtually naked, emphasizing his aged, heavily veined skin.\textsuperscript{83} At Galerie Tripp, Clément opened his review by thanking God that there were still painters able to resist the pervasive current of ugly realism.\textsuperscript{84} Naturally he favored the smaller triptych as being more focused and unified and felt that secondary areas in the larger one had received too much attention.

Like the large \textit{Eros} (1873, fig. 42), the painted surface of the 1881 triptych also contains significant areas of boldly applied paint. This may not be too surprising given its size but it is important to stress that this is not a minutely painted work with an enamel-like surface. Lecomte du Nouy’s decision to represent the Greek poet in an unflattering realist manner confirms that he was not operating in a vacuum; indeed he was very aware of current aesthetic trends, including the fashion for Spanish painting and “ugly realism” practiced by such artists as Bonnat and Théodule Ribot.\textsuperscript{85} As usual, critical responses ranged from Clément’s plaudits to objections that such an academic work was too old fashioned. Some, like the publicist and art writer Ernest Chesneau, were less troubled by this anachronism:

I prefer Mr. Lecomte du Nouy. He certainly comes a century too late […], and yes, it all betrays the routine of the contests at the Ecole, but with an energetic, stubborn conviction that pleases me. Its only fault is that it happens after the fact. In 1802, this Homer would

\textsuperscript{81} Anonymous, \textit{l’Événement, Salon de 1882}, cited from Montgailhard 1906, p. 125; for the French text see cat. 160.
\textsuperscript{82} Clément 1882, page not known; for the French text see cat. 160.
\textsuperscript{83} Tinterow 2003, p. 83, 467, cat. 92.
\textsuperscript{84} Clément 1886; for the French text see cat. 160.
\textsuperscript{85} Tinterow 2003.
have ravished the admirers of Girodet-Trioson and Firmin-Didot would have entrusted the painter with an important part in the famous illustrated edition of the Greek classics, next to Gérard, Girodet, Ingres, and Percier. I would add that Lecomte du Nouÿ would have held his place with dignity.  

By contrast, Houssaye, rather than being concerned about stylistic correctness or the timeliness of the subject, perceived Lecomte du Nouÿ’s chief error as his theoretical approach. This view again raises the problematic status of “archeological” painting. As Houssaye argued:

Here is finally the large triptych in which Lecomte du Nouÿ represented the sleeping Homer flanked by the personifications of the Iliad and the Odyssey. Ingres had conceived Homer in the non-personal and grandiose character of the god of poetry. Lecomte du Nouÿ, whose serious and original talent we like, erred according to us in representing Homer as the real and living figure that comes from the old wives’ tales of the false Herodotus and the pseudo Plutarch. A discussion about the very problematic existence of a single poet as the author of the Iliad and the Odyssey would be here out of place. Nonetheless, let’s say that the symbolic Homer by Ingres is truer than the Homer by Lecomte du Nouÿ. We do not know a begging Homer, a blind Homer, a Homer beaten by the inhabitants of Cumae and attacked by the dogs of the shepherd Glaucus, instead we revere the ideal Homer of the apotheosis.

Houssaye thus challenged Lecomte du Nouÿ’s representation of Homer as a human being of flesh and blood, raising the still unresolved question of whether the poet actually existed, and if so, whether he really would have been the sole author of all the verses in the Iliad and the Odyssey. This reproach reflects the critic’s concern for historical accuracy, which the painter surely shared to a certain extent. When Louis Énault, in a laudatory review of the triptych, called Lecomte du Nouÿ “an informed man, well lettered, and a passionate erudite,” he was certainly thinking of the artist’s ability to revive ancient times convincingly. The wide-ranging discussion of this Homer’s “correctness” is reminiscent of Grangedor’s questioning of Lecomte du Nouÿ’s depiction of Minerva in Ajax (cat. 43), which he thought anachronistic. The scholarship underlying works of academic art was an important issue for historical genre painters of Lecomte du Nouÿ’s generation, even if exacting accuracy was not a goal in itself.

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86 Chesneau 1882, p. 218; for the French text see cat. 160. On Chesneau, see Bouillon 1990.
88 Énault 1882, cited from Montgailhard 1906, p. 56; for the French text see cat. 160.
II. VIA A DISTANT PRESENT TO A DISTANT PAST

The archeological correctness that Lecomte du Nouy and his peers sought was always contentious. They created visual reconstructions based on the latest scholarship, yet were well aware of the inherent limitations facing them. One reason that Orientalist subjects became so appealing for these painters is that they avoided some of the problems of correct historical representation. Montgailhard noted that Lecomte du Nouy’s fascination with Egypt was first aroused by reading Gautier’s *Le roman de la momie* (1857), “which taught him to cherish this gigantic and unforgettable land of Egypt before knowing it.” Of course, the artist had long admired the Egyptian pictures of his teacher Gérôme. Montgailhard argued that: “Before having been in Egypt, du Nouy could do archeology and paint sincere pictures of this legendary country. After his voyage, it was impossible to start again. Because the environment, the types, the physiognomies, the matter itself, are so different and special that it is impossible to make realistic paintings without working in the places themselves. And for those who can see, little has changed in this immobile country. One still finds there the gestures, the habits, the costumes, and even the plants in the gardens identical to those represented on the monuments from Ramses’s times.”

This observation addresses two important issues related to both archeological and Orientalist painting during this period. Firstly, it was thought impossible to make truthful historical paintings of a foreign character in France; unfamiliar environments could not be accurately recreated on canvas outside their original setting. Thus, even though Lecomte du Nouy continued to paint such pictures, he knew he was not rendering absolutely truthful compositions. While his urge to visit Egypt grew from a desire to learn about extinct cultures, actual exposure to Egypt almost defeated that effort because it revealed the virtually insurmountable complexities of truthful representation. Secondly, the Middle East was thought to have retained the relics and culture of past centuries more than other regions. In that respect, going there was perceived as a journey back in time, one that allowed a blurring of the distinction between geographical and chronological distance. Artists like Lecomte du Nouy realized that this was, in fact, true only to a

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89 Montgailhard 1906, p. 47-49.
certain extent, which may have been one of the reasons they painted more scenes of the contemporary East. Thus, they could avoid the complexities of historical reconstruction, while the surroundings provided enough exotic material to satisfy both their own artistic ambitions and the public’s seemingly inexhaustible demand.

Whether Lecomte du Nouy was painting a historical scene, from which he was separated in time, or a land far from his Paris studio where he made most of these Orientalist pictures, he always sought to create a striking image that captured the right atmosphere and character. Two anecdotes recorded by Montgailhard are particularly revealing. The remarkable salon painting of 1877, *The Gate of the Harem, Souvenir of Cairo* (La porte du sérial, fig. 101; cat. 116), caught the attention of his friend and colleague, the Orientalist painter Théodore Ralli (1852-1909). In this picture, six harem guards lounge languidly on Persian rugs before an elaborately decorated doorway. Some sleep or smoke pipes while a black panther hisses at a passing stork. Despite the men’s passive attitude, there seems little doubt that any attempt to trespass on their territory would be futile. Greatly impressed by the picture, Ralli subsequently visited Cairo seeking the exact location of this composition. Upon his return to Paris, he asked Lecomte du Nouy about the spot, for which he had searched in vain. The painter replied with a smile: “Nowhere, it was born in my imagination, based upon the many documents scattered around me, that I have complemented or varied to my liking so well, that it resembles nothing.” Lecomte du Nouy further astounded Ralli as they discussed another Orientalist picture, *Ronde de nuit autour d’un harem* (Nightwatch outside a Harem, date and location unknown), the landscape of which Ralli admired. After enjoying his friend’s praise for his great sense of the Orient, Lecomte du Nouy confided that he had begun sketching this exotic landscape in Ralli’s own Paris garden.90

These anecdotes underline the fact that, despite their careful finish and detail, such contemporary Oriental scenes should not be read as photo-realistic recording of things the artist had seen. The term “souvenir” used in Lecomte du Nouy’s subtitle for this and other of his works was indeed no more than a visual reminiscence of things or places the artist had experienced. In the tradition of Vermeer’s *View of Delft* (ca. 1660-61, Mauritshuis, The Hague), which is not an exact topographical rendition of that Dutch

90 Montgailhard 1906, p. 54-55.
town, Lecomte du Nouÿ and others sought simply to obtain the most satisfying artistic
effect. Their audiences were for the most part conscious of this practice. In view of the
actual conception of *The Gate of the Harem, Souvenir of Cairo*, Duranty’s review of it
assumes added meaning: this modernist-leaning critic was not at all concerned with
whether the scene correctly rendered a specific location, but devoted all his attention to
its gripping Middle Eastern atmosphere:

Mohammetism still has its believers and the sun of the picturesque Orient still rises over
Parisian art. *The Gate of the Harem* by Mr. Lecomte du Nouy is infused with our
anecdotal and malicious spirit. This painting is not treated with a loose brush, as he is too
concerned with details, but how well do these black guards wake up, how they stretch,
still drowsy, with a vague look in their eyes! The first light of dawn glistens slightly
metallically on their shiny skin, but the modeling is very precise, the color is matte, firm,
the scene very curious, the arrangement full of taste and skill; the profound, transparent
shadow covers the blue and green tiles without fading them out, and its tones play well
with those of the tapestries under the oblique rays of the waking day, in such a way that
the fires of the sun crown the building in the distance, its lower sections rising from the
gray of dawn. The excessive neatness of the fabrics and the very fresh costumes
nonetheless furthers the idea of the exact Oriental reality. The embellishments of the
memory have here brought back the faded old Orient.91

Houssaye, on the other hand, was less convinced by the truthfulness of this composition.
In fact, he deplored Lecomte du Nouÿ’s departure from his successful *néo-grec* subjects
in favor of representing contemporary Egypt:

It is not sufficient to drape antique figures like statues and to paint accessories from
plates in archeological dictionaries; it is necessary to know how to infuse these figures
with an ancient character. Mr. Hillemacher has not done this. On the contrary, that is
what Mr. Lecomte du Nouÿ does so well. Unfortunately for us and for himself, Mr.
Lecomte du Nouÿ this year has left ancient Greece for contemporary Egypt, of which he
has painted one of its elements in *The Gate of the Harem in Cairo*. This desertion has
damaged his talent. One rightly says that it is not given to everybody to go to Corinth; so
why do those who have victoriously chosen residence there want to leave?92

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91 Duranty 1877, p. 79-80; for the French text see cat. 116. On Duranty, see Bouillon 1990.
92 Houssaye 1877, p. 844 (republised in, Houssaye 1883, p. 159); for the French text see cat. 116.
Another solution for the artist to the problem of historical authenticity was to circumvent the issue altogether, instead composing images that were unapologetically fictional, often based on well-known literary sources. For academically trained artists this was not difficult or unusual, as they were traditionally trained to create idealized compositions in order to convey the most convincing and universal message. These and other concerns recur in many of Lecomte du Nouy’s paintings, Orientalist and otherwise, which are discussed here in greater detail.

_The Bearers of Bad Tidings_ (Les porteurs de mauvaises nouvelles, 1871)

Unfortunately, the painting that best represented Lecomte du Nouy to his contemporaries, and that therefore would be extremely important for us, cannot be found. _The Bearers of Bad Tidings_ (fig. 82; cat. 64), known through many photographs and prints, is one of the artist’s most original compositions. Lecomte du Nouy started working on the painting in 1864 but did not finish it until about 1870. He exhibited it in 1872, at the first salon organized after the Franco-Prussian War.\(^93\) As he conceived the picture before his first voyage to Egypt and completed it afterwards, it automatically embodies many of the dilemmas regarding authentic representation discussed above. The painting depicts a pharaoh who has just killed three messengers for failing to find the common girl he loves. The work is _néo-grec_ in that it revives an ancient culture through an unusual, individualized, and dramatic scene. It centers on a type of character usually celebrated in a history painting—in this case a political leader—yet focuses on a psychological predicament with no known basis in history or even mythology. Despite the gruesomeness of the subject, characteristic of works in the grand historical tradition, this is emphatically a genre picture because it concentrates on a highly personal incident. Despite Lecomte du Nouy’s careful historical research of details, it clearly represents a fictional story. In the salon catalogue, the title was followed by a passage from Gautier’s

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\(^{93}\) Moreau-Vauthier 1900, p. 22; for the French text see cat. 64. See also chapter I, note 91.
novel, as well as the author’s name and the title of the book, underlining the picture’s literary source.\textsuperscript{94}

The theatrical analogies often used by nineteenth-century critics of art suited this composition perfectly. Aware of its imaginary foundation, reviewers and viewers alike still focused on the question of the artist’s skill in reviving a dramatic scene from the past. Most expressed great enthusiasm but some were annoyed. Around 1900, some three decades after the picture’s creation, Moreau-Vauthier selected \textit{The Bearers of Bad Tidings} for his book \textit{Les Chefs d’Oeuvres des Grands Maîtres} (The Masterpieces of the Great Artists). Unlike many contemporary pictures it still incited contemplation, curiosity, and learning:

The ingenious and probable archeological reconstruction is interesting; we don’t ask anything more and the artist deserves all praise. Spiritual and delicate, he doesn’t pretend to move us; he understands how the tragic tone seems vulgar and out of place in this historic fantasy. It’s a tale, a fairy-tale, an opera staging that is offered up for our curiosity. Soon the slaves will stand up like extras, and return their lanterns to the prop storeroom and the pharaoh will return to his dressing-room with his crown, scepter and terrible yataghan. Under the Second Empire, our French artists represented in very different works the picturesque life on the banks of the Nile. Whereas most featured the present, some wanted to evoke the past. […] A great success crowned the knowledge and talent of the painter, and \textit{The Bearers of Bad Tidings} took a definitive place among the pictures that everyone needs to know and admire. Despite the fact that for many years already, art criticism has undergone an exaggerated infatuation in favor of painting without ordnance and composition, the more eclectic and true connoisseurs have not ceased to esteem works that revive lost civilizations, create an interest in the past, and in one word, instruct.\textsuperscript{95}

\textit{The Bearers of Bad Tidings} seamlessly blends fact and fiction, and is infused not only with overt doses of barbaric violence, but also a strong erotic tension. The anxious pharaoh watches broodingly over the sleeping city. Three barely clad corpses lie motionless in the foreground, their crushed skulls leaving little puddles of blood. In the background, two women stand in a doorway patiently awaiting the pharaoh’s next instruction; but he can think only of Tahoser, the absent woman he desires. It was the subject’s barbarity that generated the most attention, apparently causing quite a stir at the

\textsuperscript{94} See cat. 64 for the text of the Salon catalogue. The many reproductions of the work, either prints or photographs, also often retained the reference to Gautier’s \textit{Roman de la momie}.

\textsuperscript{95} Moreau-Vauthier 1900, p. 22; for the French text see cat. 64.
salon, where it earned the painter a second-class medal. More importantly, the
government purchased it for the Musée du Luxembourg, then the main showcase for
French modern art.

These honors challenged many reviewers to share their own opinions. Lafenestre
cited the relevant passage from Gautier’s novel and concluded that the painter’s dry
technique did not do justice to Gautier’s elaborate prose:

His *Bearers of Bad Tidings* are the messengers that have just announced to the pharaoh,
from the *Roman de la momie*, that they have been unable to trace the beautiful Tahoser:
“The hours followed the hours; the sun had already disappeared behind the mountains,
throwing its last fires at Thebes, and the messengers did not return. Pharaoh always
remained still. The night spread out over the city, calm, cool, and blue; and on the corner
of the terrace, the silent and impassible pharaoh cut his black contours like a basalt statue
sealed to the entablature [...]”. From this elevation, the king dominated the city unfolding
at his feet [...]. Looking down with his eyes and thoughts upon this enormous city of
which he was the absolute master, pharaoh sadly contemplated the limits of human power
[...]. A first messenger appeared on the terrace, announcing to pharaoh that Tahoser was
untraceable. The pharaoh struck out his scepter, the messenger fell dead.” Two other
messengers then faced the same ending. Mr. Lecomte du Nouy shows the three corpses
stretched out in front of the sumptuously dressed pharaoh who leans on his elbow on the
high terrace overlooking Thebes. The drawing of Mr. du Nouy is conscientious and fine,
severe and forced; his qualities are those of his master, Mr. Gérôme, who has transmitted
them to his loyal disciple; yet, at the same time the master has transmitted to his pupil a
taste for dry contours, cold harmonies, monochromatic colors that have not permitted Mr.
Lecomte du Nouy to translate the brilliant prose of Théophile Gautier in all its richness.96

Jules Claretie, a prolific writer on artistic matters and at one point the
administrator of the Comédie-Française, had predicted that such a violent scene would
not attract a large audience, but admitted he was mistaken:

There is always a crowd in front of this painting, which has achieved great success. The
subject, however, was not made to attract the public. The drama—as the painted
inscription on the frame informs us—occurs under King Sipta Ménephta of the
eighteenth dynasty, 1500 years before Christ, and in theory would not have much chance
of obtaining a popular success. Still, the painting by Mr. Lecomte du Nouy has received
this success. There is a certain mystery in the gaze of this pharaoh lying on his pillows,
biting his nails, waiting impatiently, contemplating a city asleep. And lying at his feet,
those who came not to tell him: “Your dream has been realized!” What dream was this?
Those who have read the admirable book by Gautier, *Le Roman de la Momie*, will

96 Lafenestre 1881, p. 265-266; for the French text see cat. 64.
remember the scene where the silent pharaoh [...] cries out into the night: “Tahoser, Tahoser” while cracking with his metal scepter the hard skulls of the messengers who could not tell him that Tahoser was not far away. It is that scene that Mr. Lecomte du Nouÿ has rendered. He has reconstructed a sleeping Thebes, with its gigantic buildings, the palaces of Ramses and Amenophis. He has placed the pharaoh on his terrace like an Osirian statue, and he thus created a very dramatic décor, although, truth be said, the sky in itself, and the whole composition are similar to a beautiful opera backdrop. Maybe that’s why the audience has paid so much attention to this drama? The corpses of the dead, as if they were bronze sculptures lying on the ground, have struck me in particular.97

Jules Castagnary felt that historical and biblical painting had far outlived its significance and that salon visitors hardly paid attention to them unless the scene was particularly strange.98 He recognized that many artists desperately sought attention for their works among the thousands hanging at the salon. One way of doing so, of course, was to invent striking images, something at which Lecomte du Nouÿ certainly succeeded in this case. When Dubosc de Pesquidoux noted this painting’s appearance at the 1878 Exposition Universelle, it was already well known: it had not only been on public view since 1872, but its composition had also been widely disseminated through various kinds of reproductions. This critic focused primarily on the philosophical impact of the image, and displayed an unabashedly self-righteous attitude toward a non-western culture, stressing the underlying subject of Oriental despotism, that, he felt, had been righted by Christianity:

The pharaoh of The Bearers of Bad Tidings has the fault to remain obscure for those who have not read the Momie by Théophile Gautier. One should see in this sovereign with his many bands, turning on his couch without finding ease, a good personification of Oriental despotism. Forgetting the three victims that he just struck and whose bloody corpses lay at his feet, pharaoh is all in his boredom, his incommensurable sadness, his unfulfilled dreams. He contemplates the immense city asleep under his eyes and regrets, perhaps like Caligula later, the other despot fashioned by quiritary rudeness, that his people do not have one single head to give him the pleasure to slice it with one single blow. It is human omnipotence brought to a halt, and unfortunate for the excess of a power that no movement directs to a human and superior goal. The layout, curious and solid, except for a few crude touches, gives the idea of excessive grandeur of the monstrous civilizations that Christianity had to conquer and replace.99

97 Jules Claretie, l’Art français en 1872, cited from Montgailhard 1906, p. 117-118; for the French text see cat. 64.
98 Castagnary 1892, II, p. 20-22; for the French text see cat. 64.
99 Dubosc de Pesquidoux 1878, p. 24-25; for the French text see cat. 64.
Philadelphia journalist Edward Strahan (pseudonym for Earl Shinn, who had also briefly studied with Gérôme in Paris) reported on the Exposition Universelle for an American audience and selected this work as one of its masterpieces. His review addressed not only artistic issues, such as the picture’s technical merits, but also racial and cultural ones related to its subject. Although most commentators viewed The Bearers of Bad Tidings as historical or Orientalist, Strahan called it Biblical in treatment, even as he credited its secular source. Like Dubosc de Pesquidoux, Strahan saw the picture’s representation of despotic arrogance as a testament to the superiority of Western, Christian civilizations over those of the barbaric and backward Orient:

Lent by the Luxembourg Gallery, which owns the canvas, M. Lecomte-du-Nouy’s picture of the ‘Bearers of Evil Tidings’ takes its place as a selected standard of French Art, crowned by Governmental choice. Biblical in period and treatment, and to the eye an illustration of that Egypt which was the harsh foster-nurse of the Jewish race, the composition was, in fact, inspired by […] “The Mummy,” by Théophile Gautier. […] The picture exhibits a chiseled precision of detail which would seem to make it classable with sculptor’s work as much as with painting. We cannot deny that this canvas gives evidence of uncommon talent: by no means. We are grateful to the author for his niceties of manipulations and for his archeological researches. We can hardly expect from an artist whose forte is sculptural accuracy of drawing those lambent charms of atmosphere and color which are the property of “impressionist” painters; can hardly look for the vibrating tints of Decamps or Delacroix, or expect to see, along with the rigid anatomy of our painter, those tepid transparencies of the nights of sun-loved lands. The charm of such a work as this is different in kind: it is accuracy of study, masterliness of manipulation; it is balanced symmetry, which is surely one of the forms of harmony. […] But we should not allow our attention to be too much entrapped by these learned perfections. Over all, we must perceive the terrible and sinister nature of the subject, —a scene of death, with its agonies and supreme convulsions, —a picture of irresponsible power, unsated after its most deadly exertion! We must look among these wretched ministers of tyranny for the manly obedience, the unquestioning submission which leads them to run up one after the other to their doom as fleetly as to a festival! We must let our imagination create an atmosphere of terrible apprehension, the brooding misgivings and patient fidelity of these wretched officers—the Oriental humility expressed in the Biblical words: “Ye have made our labor to be abhorred in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to slay us!” The mere discovery and turn of his theme by our artist is in the nature of a lucky hit or windfall. The idea of these obedient ministers uncomplainingly dying by their monarch’s hand while he muses dissatisfied on other things—the submissiveness of slavery and its insufficiency to fulfill the schemes of inordinate ambition—is a contrast of purposes which might have tempted Michel Angelo. Which are to be envied, the subjects whose all is but to attempt and to die, or the despot who can command everything and never attain satisfaction? Another painter might have
treated this drama with more fire and vitality. M. Lecomte-du-Nouy treats it in a spirit of brooding, reposeful, yet not satisfied philosophy, which has its own peculiar effect on the feelings of the beholder, and which keeps within the limits of quietude imposed by the canons of grand art.100

The great popularity of The Bearers of Bad Tidings is confirmed by the existence of numerous nineteenth-century engravings, lithographs, and photographs after it. These reproductions typically appeared in popular journals or were sold individually by publishers like Goupil & Cie.101 Thus the composition was recognizable to a large audience, including people who did not visit the salon or the Musée du Luxembourg.

When the German historian Friedrich Hottenroth published his survey of historical costumes around 1884 in Stuttgart (soon thereafter published in France and the United States), a plate titled Antiquité: Egypte-Ethiopie featured this composition (minus the messengers’ corpses), as well as figures in various Egyptian costumes (fig. 83).102

Perhaps an even more significant indicator of the popular status of this painting, both in France and abroad, is a caricature published on the eve of World War I in the British journal The Bystander (fig. 84). Signed by Sid Treeby, the caricature is titled Bearers of Evil Tidings, and shows a devilish-looking German in black tie and top hat in the same pose as the pharaoh in Lecomte de Nouy’s painting. The awning above him is anchored at one end by a model battleship, and the city of Thebes in the original composition has been transformed here into a dense landscape of smoking chimneys. The three messengers on the ground are wrapped in rolls of paper reading “Naval” “Holiday” and “Proposals” and the caption below reads “A picture portraying the tragic fate of Mr. Churchill’s ‘messengers’ at the hands of the German ‘Armaments’ party. (After the painting by J. A. Lecomte du Nouy in the Luxembourg).” Both the fashion plate and the caricature indicate the lasting impact of Lecomte du Nouy’s painting in the popular mind, even long after this kind of art had gone out of vogue.

100 Strahan 1878, p. 37. For a similarly degrading attitude by Strahan towards Muslim culture in another of his reviews, see: Diederenk 2001, p. 34-35. It discusses Jaroslav Čermák’s Abduction of a Herzegovenian Woman (1861, New York, Dahesh Museum of Art).
101 Several of these reproductions are kept at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Cabinet des estampes, code DC 309 vol. I-IV; as well as at the Musée Goupil in Bordeaux. On the activities of the firm Goupil as a 19th-century art dealer and publisher, see Gérôme & Goupil 2000.
102 Hottenroth 1884, plate 8. I wish to thank Adrienne Childs for bringing this plate to my attention.
A more tangential connection with Lecomte du Nouy's painting can perhaps be established through the film *Salomé*, directed in 1922 by Charles Bryant and starring his wife, Alla Nazimova (1879-1945), in the title role. Based on the play by Oscar Wilde and shot entirely in a Hollywood studio with sets and costumes inspired by Aubrey Beardsley's famous illustrations to the story of Salomé, the movie retains a decidedly theatrical feeling. In one scene, a scantily clad black servant relays a message from King Herod to the self-absorbed princess Salomé. When the servant lies face down on the floor, she does not kill him but rests one foot on his head, in a scene of total submissiveness that is reminiscent of *The Bearers of Bad Tidings* (fig. 85). Even though one may never be able to prove that Bryant knew the painting or a reproduction of it, the visual similarity, even if purely coincidental, confirms the parentage between this kind of historical painting and early cinema.

Finally, Lecomte du Nouy's painting made a tremendous impression on the novelist Julian Green (1900-98), who recorded his vivid recollections of the painting in an autobiography of his childhood years. In several passages, Green recalled how the image of the pharaoh and the nude black corpses lying in front of him awakened his sexual awareness and guilt-ridden attraction toward the male body. He first saw the painting during a visit with his mother and sisters to the Musée du Luxembourg:

We then passed on to the paintings, some of which linger in my mind: Cormon's "Cain," Bonnat's "Job," [fig. 81] a picture I thought repulsive. There was also the "Lady with the Glove," by Carolus Duran, and then, at sometime or other, we found ourselves in a smaller gallery; there, a certain picture held my mother's attention, because, she said, you could understand the feelings of an indignant pharaoh who had just killed with his own hand two [sic] slaves, the bearers of evil tidings. Fuming with rage, he lay on his couch with his victims dying at his feet. A long, bloodstained sword told the story in its own way. "Yes," Mamma, would say, with a gay little laugh, "I can understand the man." And turning to her daughters, she added: "Now please don't take what I say literally. You're so foolish!" As a rule, her sarcastic remarks were addressed to my sisters, not to me, either because she thought me too young to understand, or because she loved me a little more than the others. Alas, she had no idea of what she was doing, for the enemy lent me a terrible lucidity when I looked at that picture. I do not know when it first struck my eye. Probably not before I was six. After the age of eleven, I never saw it again, but between six and eleven I was very often shown it, with devastating effects. I am not expressing myself too strongly. Were it not for that picture my life would not perhaps have turned

103 Green 1993. The book covers the years 1900-1916. I wish to thank Mr. Denis Coutagne, Aix-en-Provence, for pointing out to me Green's considerations on this painting.
out as it did. I imagine that my first sight of it only moved me faintly, but how can I tell? Is it not possible, on the contrary, that I was then given a violent and determinative shock? In any case, there came a day when, with all the pain a man is capable of bearing, I felt the torment of unappeased hunger. I remember very clearly that under a kind of hallucination, I fancied that one of the great brown bodies struck down by death really lay under my very eyes, and it seemed as though my whole being, soul and flesh, threw itself on him. At the same time, I knew this to be an impossibility. Such painful frustration is not to be described. It left a deep mark on me forever. All that life could teach me about the *durus amor*, I learned in the space of a few seconds and at an age when I could not understand its significance. All I knew is that I felt unhappy, and unhappy for the first time in my life, without having the least idea why. It never occurred to me that the slave in question was very closely connected to the lost soul in *The Divine Comedy.* I only entered into such considerations much later.  

As Lecomte du Nouy’s oeuvre reveals his own clear predilection for the female body, he probably would have been surprised by Green’s reaction to *The Bearers of Bad Tidings.* Indeed, this picture, more than any other by the artist, clearly appealed to viewers on many different levels and over a remarkably long period of time. This may ultimately be every artist’s dream, and it certainly is an important factor in assessing a great work of art.

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104 Green 1993, p. 31-32. Green viewed his own youthful drawings of nude figures with a similar sense of guilt: “My pink nudes (of a toothpaste pink) were, in my own judgment, impure. In the same way, Dante’s *Inferno* and the picture at the Luxembourg. All that formed part of an interdict, together with a great many other things.” (p. 60). On p. 64, he continues to describe visiting the sculpture galleries in the Louvre and how this experienced “a kind of sexual intoxication.” Then on p. 120, he noted: “At thirteen, I was far more innocent than at ten, or eight, when “The Bearers of Evil Tidings” made me faint with languor.” Not only did the actual encounters with the painting stir the boy’s emotions, a black-and-white reproduction of it in a large book in his parents’ library continued to work its haunting spell: “[...] I waited with a pleasure where horror had its part – my conscience worked on me – for the fascinating page that would show me “The Bearers of Evil Tidings.” The Luxembourg painting, there it was, at last under my eyes, it was mine, and mine alone, in the alarming solitude – the strange nature of which I vaguely guessed. Of course the magic of color, the skin golden as sand, were lacking, but with burning cheeks and open mouth I looked once more at the torturing picture. I suffered as much as a man can suffer, but the difference was that I knew nothing about the character of my pain, nor did I know what I wanted, nor why I felt so unhappy, I only knew that if I had been that savage pharaoh, I would have spared the messenger, even if he had brought me news twenty times worse. Then, talking to myself in my emotion and my insides tightening with inexplicable covetousness, I closed the big album and replaced it on the shelf. And I forgot. I forgot with astonishing ease. Not a trace of obsession in my life. Only these very rare moments that prodigiously favored bold action. Then obsession took hold of my will power: I was thrown into the enemy’s hands. With a dexterity fit to disconcert the most skillful people, he was careful not to prompt me to make dangerous gestures that might have enlightened me regarding myself, he merely contended himself with lodging in me, in my memory, as it were in my whole being, pictures that fascinated the child in order to bewitch the man, later on...” (p. 102-103).
III. EUNUCHS, DRUGS, AND HAREM SLAVES: ORIENTALISM IN THE WORK OF LECOMTE DU NOUY

Apart from the fame it brought the artist, *The Bearers of Bad Tidings* is a prime example of the way in which Lecomte de Nouy effectively combined his penchant for archeological accuracy with fictional elements. It reflected the artist’s love for Egypt, a country he had visited and that had already provided him with the material for such contemporary subjects as *A Gatekeeper in Cairo* (Un portier au Caire, cat. 25), and *The Dancing Fellah Woman* (La danseuse fellah, fig. 21). Lecomte du Nouy would continue to paint many contemporary Orientalist scenes, ranging from quick oil sketches made during his travels, to highly finished salon pictures perfected in his Paris studio.

Orientalism in art is not connected to a specific stylistic or theoretical trend, but is primarily defined by its subject matter. This might explain the various versions of it presented by such ideologically diverse painters as the Romantics Gabriel Decamps (1803-1860) and Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), the Neoclassicist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867), the Impressionist Auguste Renoir (1841-1919), and the Fauvist Henri Matisse (1869-1954), and a great many others. While some artists, like Ingres, never traveled outside Europe, most were curious to learn more about ancient cultures, others were lured by the contemporary unknown; all were inspired by an unfamiliar environment and its people’s customs and beliefs.

As with his explorations of *néo-grec* imagery, Lecomte du Nouy’s involvement with Orientalism occurred relatively late within the phenomenon’s heyday. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Orientalism gained enormous momentum as a result of European colonial expansion. By the second half of the century, Orientalist art was so common that certain critics had developed an aversion to it. In an 1876 Salon review, the critic Jules Castagnary found the subject passé, but nonetheless gave an interesting recapitulation of its origins:

Why doesn’t one understand that Orientalism doesn’t stick to our entrails and doesn’t remain in our thoughts, and that it has never been anything else but a matter of fashion and infatuation? Do you remember how it began? The insurrection of Greece [War of Greek Independence (1821-30)] and the death of Lord Byron [1824] were the starting
points. It provoked an emotion in France never seen since, even when national interests seemed to commend it. All eyes, all hearts turned towards the Bosphorus. In conversations there was only talk about Missolonghi, Chios, Istanbul and Canari [on Corsica]. Young people were carried away. Everyone began to make the Orient of invention, without having seen it, without knowing it. Delacroix, in his studio in the rue de Grenelle (Saint-Germain), painted the episode of the massacre of Chios (1824); Victor Hugo, pacing the nursery gardens of the Luxembourg, composed les Orientales (1827). Finally, the cannon at Navarino resounded. [The battle of Navarino on October 20, 1827, was the final event that established the independence of Greece.] The Orient had opened to our landscape painters. Decamps and Marilhat hurried there at once.105

Orientalist pictures may have bored Castagnary and certain other critics, but they remained thoroughly popular among artists and the (buying) audience toward the end of the century. In 1882, Lecomte du Nouy not only exhibited his large Homer triptych (fig. 20; cat. 160), he also showed the Orientalist canvas The Rabbis commenting on the Bible on Saturday (Les rabbins commentant la Bible (Maroc), fig. 126). Gaston Schéfer seized this opportunity to introduce his salon review with another brief history of Orientalist art, and continued by lamenting the sorry state into which the genre had fallen. He acknowledged Lecomte du Nouy’s powers of observation and handling, yet was not convinced that works of this type still contributed to the advancement of art. Indeed, he addressed the same idea of progress in art that many of his colleagues had cited when discussing néo-grec painting:

*The Orient.* Some fifty years ago, a few French artists, Delacroix, Decamps, Marilhat, etc., headed towards the Orient and discovered it. They brought back admirable works; better than that even, a ray of sunlight, that from there shone like a burning fire on all of French painting. But today, the Orient no longer has its light to bestow upon us, nor the brilliance of its costumes, nor the surprise of its customs: all of that is known and done. It has once again played its role of initiator. Art steeped itself in its light and its warmth as

105 Castagnary 1892, II, p. 248: “Comment ne comprend-on pas que l’orientalisme ne tient pas à nos entrailles et au fond de notre pensée, qu’il n’a jamais été chez nous qu’une affaire de mode et d’engouement? Vous rappelez-vous comment la chose vint? C’est l’insurrection de la Grèce et la mort de Lord Byron qui furent le point de départ. Il y eut alors en France une émotion comme on n’en a pas vu depuis, même quand des intérêts nationaux semblaient la commander. Tous les regards, tous les coeurs se tournèrent vers le Bosphore. Dans les conversations, il ne fut plus question que de Missolonghi, de Scio, de Stamboul et du Grand Canaris. La jeunesse fut entraînée. Tout le monde se mit à faire de l’Orient d’invention, sans avoir vu, sans le connaître. Delacroix, dans son atelier de la rue de Grenelle – Saint Germain, peignit l’épisode enflammé du massacre de Scio (1824); Victor Hugo, en se promenant dans la pépinière du Luxembourg, rima les Orientales (1827). Enfin, le canon de Navarini retentit. L’Orient était ouvert à nos paysagistes. Decamps et Marilhat s’y précipitèrent.” On Castagnary, see Bouillon 1990. 106
in the fountain of youth; it has nothing left to find here and painters abandon it now with the ingratitude that is the bitter but necessary law of progress.\textsuperscript{106}

However, the reservations of critics like Castagnary and Schéfer clearly had no great influence on the course of Lecomte du Nouÿ’s art. In fact, throughout his career he continued to paint the very type of works attacked by these and other progressive critics—either descriptive genre paintings in contemporary North African or Middle Eastern settings, or wholly invented scenes of cultures long gone. In this latter category Lecomte du Nouÿ contributed some of his most original compositions to the genre of Orientalist painting.

*The Dream of a Eunuch* (Un rêve d’eunuque, 1874) and Related Compositions.

*The Dream of a Eunuch* (fig. 87; cat. 92) is a fascinating painting that touches upon many aspects of late nineteenth-century academic and Orientalist art. Lecomte de Nouÿ presumably conceived this work with the popular success of *The Bearers of Bad Tidings* (fig. 82) in mind; it similarly combines exoticism with elements of violence and lust. But unlike *The Bearers of Bad Tidings*, *The Dream of a Eunuch* was not exhibited at the Salon of 1875; instead, the artist showed a version of this subject with a completely different composition titled *The Dream of Cosrou* (Le rêve de Cosrou, 1875; fig. 88; cat. 102), at the Salon of 1875.\textsuperscript{107} To complicate things even more, there is a photograph of yet another version of the first composition, in which the crucial element of the smoke-formed figures is omitted (fig. 86; cat. 86). Like the Homer triptychs, these three closely related compositions provide useful insights into Lecomte du Nouÿ’s artistic practice.

*The Dream of a Eunuch* (fig. 87) and *The Dream of Cosrou* (fig. 88), are based on one letter from Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu’s (1689-1755) *Lettres persanes* (Persian Letters, 1721), a novel comprised of some 161 fictitious letters written by, among others, two Persian noblemen visiting Paris, and by their wives and servants at home in the Persian capital of Ispahan (Esfahan in present-day Iran). This book was published anonymously by Montesquieu in Holland; it not only enabled the philosopher

\textsuperscript{106} Schéfer 1882, p. 177-78; for the French text see cat. 172.

\textsuperscript{107} My first research on this painting was published in d’Argencourt and Diederen 1999, II, p. 384-389. New findings since that publication, allow me to now offer slight amendments to this earlier research.
to criticize various aspects of contemporary French society, but also to discuss life in the Middle East, especially the customs of the harem. Lecomte de Nouÿ himself was evidently fascinated by this mysterious residence for concubines and created several more paintings of this subject.

In letter fifty-three of Lettres persanes, Zélis writes to her husband Usbek in Paris from the harem:

No passion was ever stronger or more vehement than that of Cosrou, the white eunuch, for my slave Zélide: he has asked for her hand in marriage with such persistence, that I can no longer refuse him. And why should I resist, when her mother does not, and since Zélide herself seems satisfied with this mock marriage, and the empty shadow that it offers her? What does she want with this unfortunate creature, who will merely be a jealous husband; who will only exchange his coldness for a useless despair; who, by perpetually recalling the memory of what he was, will only remind her of what he no longer is; who, always ready to give himself, but never giving, will deceive himself and always deceive her, making her constantly aware of the misery of his condition. And then! To be always in dreams and fantasies; to live only in imagination; to be always close to pleasure but never to experience it; languishing in the arms of someone unhappy; instead of responding to happy sighs merely answering one’s regrets. Shouldn’t one only have contempt for such a man, made only to guard and never to possess? I seek the love and don’t see it. I speak to you freely as you like my naiveté, and because you prefer my free spirit and my sensibility for the pleasures with the feigned decency of my companions. I’ve heard you say a thousand times that eunuchs enjoy a kind of voluptuousness with women that is unknown to us; that nature recovers from its losses; that it has resources that repair the disadvantage of their condition; that even after no longer being a man, one is still sensitive; and that in this condition, one is more or less in a third state in which one changes pleasures. If that is true I find Zélide less pitiable. It is something to live with people who are less unhappy. Give me your orders in this matter, and let me know whether you want the marriage to take place in the seraglio. Goodbye.

From the seraglio in Ispahan, the fifth of the moon of Chalval 1713.108

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108 The original French reads: “Jamais passion n’a été plus forte et plus vive que celle de Cosrou, eunuque blanc, pour mon esclave Zélide; il la demande en mariage avec tant de fureur, que je ne puis la lui refuser. Et pourquoi ferais-je de la résistance, lorsque sa mère n’en fait pas, et que Zélide elle-même paraît satisfaite de l’idée de ce mariage imposteur, et de l’ombre vaine qu’on lui présente?

Que veut-elle faire de cet infortuné, qui n’aura d’un mari que la jalousie; qui ne sortira de sa froideur que pour entrer dans un désespoir inutile; qui se rappellera toujours la mémoire de ce qu’il a été, pour la faire souvenir de ce qu’il n’est plus; qui, toujours prêt à se donner, et ne se donnant jamais, se trompera, la trompera sans cesse, et lui fera essuyer à chaque instant tous les malheurs de sa condition?

Hé quoi! être toujours dans les images et dans les fantômes? ne vivre que pour imaginer? se trouver toujours auprès des plaisirs et jamais dans les plaisirs? languissant dans les bras d’un malheureux, au lieu de répondre à ses soupirs, ne répondre qu’à ses regrets?

Quel mépris ne doit-on pas avoir pour un homme de cette espèce, fait uniquement pour garder, et jamais pour posséder? Je cherche l’amour, et je ne le vois pas.
The Dream of a Eunuch (fig. 87; cat. 92) shows a man with Asian features reclining on a terrace beneath a star-studded sky, smoking a chibouk that induces a hallucination. Zélide, the object of his desire, materializes from the smoke and dances before him in all her feminine beauty and wearing a teasing smile. Her depiction as an ephemeral, unattainable vision alludes to Cosrou’s physical condition, which prevents his desire from becoming reality. His dream is, in fact, a nightmare (the work has at times been published as *le cauchemar d’Eunuque* (The Nightmare of a Eunuch)), as represented by Zélide’s cherubic companion, who symbolizes the source of Cosrou’s misery. This Oriental Cupid is not depicted with the traditional bow and arrow, however, but instead holds a knife dripping with blood and is seated in a barber’s bowl, the implements of Cosrou’s castration. Lecomte du Nouÿ has thus offered a piquant image to male European viewers for whom the fantasy of the harem as a realm of unrestricted love was as unattainable as Zélide was to Cosrou. The many harem scenes painted by Lecomte de Nouÿ and other artists appealed to the curiosity of Western audiences who could but fantasize about such amorous paradises (even though not all of these depictions present entirely desirable circumstances). Indeed, *The Dream of a Eunuch* focuses on the figure of the eunuch himself rather than on one of those voluptuous women and consequently functions primarily as an emblem of Oriental despotism.

For his submission to the Salon of 1875, Lecomte du Nouÿ chose the same subject but completely altered his composition (fig. 87). With a title more reflective of its literary roots, *The Dream of Cosrou* (fig. 88; cat. 102) features a black eunuch reclining in an interior, his delirium generated by the water pipe he smokes. Zélide is now

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Je te parle librement, parce que tu aimes ma naïveté, et que tu préfères mon air libre et ma sensibilité pour les plaisirs à la pudeur feinte de mes compagnes.

Je t’ai oui dire mille fois que les eunuques goûtaient avec les femmes une sorte de volupté qui nous est inconnue; que la nature se dédommage de ses pertes; qu’elle a des ressources qui réparent le désavantage de leur condition; qu’on peut bien cesser d’être homme, mais non pas d’être sensible; et que, dans cet état, on est comme dans un troisième sens, où l’on ne fait, pour ainsi dire, que changer de plaisirs.

Si cela était, je trouverais Zélide moins à plaindre; c’est quelque chose de vivre avec des gens moins malheureux.

Donne-moi tes ordres là-dessus, et fais-moi savoir si tu veux que le mariage s’accomplisse dans le sérial.

Adieu.

Du sérial d’Ispahan, le 5 de la lune de Chalval, 1713.”

109 Privat 1877, n. p.; for the French text see appendix V. Montgailhard omitted the short passage in Privat’s text that contains this reference in his 1906 reprint. In the artist’s dictionary, Siret 1883, this is one of only two paintings mentioned for the artist, and it is also called *Cauchemar d’un eunuque*, see cat. 93.

110 There is no doubt which of the two versions was exhibited at the Salon of 1875, as the work is reproduced in Dèzamy 1875, plate 37, accompanied by a poem, see cat. 102.
dressed, the little Cupid-figure is positioned within her contours, and a far less conspicuous folding razor replaces the bloodstained knife. Evidently the artist adapted his composition to make it less graphic and therefore more suitable for display at the salon than his first version. Nonetheless, when the critic de la Flécherey reviewed the 1875 Salon, he argued that while *The Dream of Cosrou* was beautifully executed, its subject was still somewhat improper.\(^{111}\) Claretie, who had so admired the corpses in *The Bearers of Bad Tidings* (though he had also questioned that work’s violent premise), now wondered disdainfully “whether painting had nothing better to present than rebuses of absolutely doubtful taste?”\(^{112}\) But the question of whether Lecomte du Nouy’s compositions were readily comprehensible was ultimately of more concern to critics than questions of good taste. The issue had been raised in reviews of other paintings by the artist, including *The Madness of Ajax the Telamonian* (cat. 43) and the Homer triptych (cat. 160). In *The Dream of Cosrou*, in particular, the artist’s form of self-censorship may have made it even more difficult for viewers who did not already know *Les lettres persanes* to comprehend fully.

A photograph of a third painting shows a composition very close to that of *The Dream of a Eunuch*, the major difference being that it lacks the apparition of Zélide (fig. 86; cat. 86).\(^{113}\) The background and terrace are virtually the same, except for a niche in the right wall, the absence of the little table with a still-life arrangement, and the bird on the battlements. Further, the man now smokes a water pipe and his features differ substantially. This last adjustment illustrates how nineteenth-century artists, in spite of an ostensible concern for accuracy, often referred indiscriminately to Middle Eastern, African, and Asian people. Montesquieu described Cosrou as white, yet in Lecomte du Nouy’s three depictions he seems to have evolved from Asian to African to Middle Eastern. This is not an insignificant detail, as there existed a strict hierarchy among eunuchs, and their rank in the harem greatly depended on their skin color and on their physical condition. Depending on the type of operation they had had and the age at which they were emasculated, certain eunuchs could be sexually active and some indeed

\(^{111}\) Flécherey 1875, p. 128-129; for the French text see cat. 102.

\(^{112}\) Claretie 1876, p. 352; for the French text see cat. 102. On Claretie, see Bouillon 1990.

\(^{113}\) When I researched the painting for the Cleveland Museum’s collection catalogue, I was not aware of the existence of this work. see note 107.
married. But when scenes of the Orient were based on literary sources, as in this case, they were often interpreted particularly freely. For instance, Lecomte du Nouy changed the harem’s location from Ispahan (Persia) to Cairo; the distinctive contours of the painted mosque resemble that Egyptian city’s mosque of Sultan Hasan. Lecomte du Nouy visited Cairo, and may have seen a similar view from the citadel, an elevation that serves in his paintings as a terrace on which the eunuch reclines.

The third painting carries a signature in the lower right corner on one of the rugs, but is not dated (fig. 86). This raises the question of the relative chronology of Lecomte du Nouy’s three works on this subject. A reference in an 1877 auction catalogue to a painting called *Le Kieff du schériff (Souvenir d’Orient)* or, (The [drug-induced] Sleep of the Chieftain (Souvenir of the Orient)), may resolve this problem. The close description of the work in the catalogue mentions that the figure seems to look at the stars as he sleeps, but it does not refer to a woman, one of the key features of the 1874 painting. It is therefore possible to assume that the 1877 auction catalogue does not refer to the 1874 painting (Cleveland Museum of Art), but rather to this presently untraced variant of it. Furthermore, in his book, Montgailhard lists a painting with the title *Le kief du schérif* under the year 1873. Thus this mystery picture must have been painted one year before *The Dream of a Eunuch* (fig. 87), which bears the date of 1874, and must also predate *The Dream of Cosrou* (fig. 88) exhibited at that year’s salon.

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115 Technical research of the Cleveland painting has revealed that the artist at one point contemplated painting a pyramid in the background. It is not clear whether this element relates to a completely different composition that had been abandoned, or whether the view in the background was first to include such a building. If the latter is the case, he may have omitted it in order not to make it too much of an “Egyptian” scene, rather than a more generic “Oriental” one. For the technical research on the painting see d’Argencourt and Diederen 1999, vol. II, p. 387, Condition Summary.
116 For the full auction catalogue description, see cat. 86. Before knowing of this third version of the composition, I assumed that the description referred to the Cleveland painting, see d’Argencourt and Diederen 1999, vol. II, p. 387, Collections.
117 Montgailhard 1906, p. 118. See cat. 86.
118 The diaries of art dealer and collector Samuel P. Avery also contain a reference that might apply to one of these works. Fidell Beaufort 1979, p. 172 (see also chapter I notes 84 and 85). On June 24, 1873, he met in Paris with the dealer George A. Lucas, and noted: “to Lecomte de Nouy image girl ready – ordered The siesta on house top at Cairo about 15 x 24 for 2000 f.” Given the date of their visit to Lecomte du Nouy and the word “siesta,” it is tempting to assume it was *The Sleep of the Chieftain* (cat. 85) that they ordered, although this title could also apply to the Cleveland picture (cat. 92). *The Sleep of the Chieftain* seems to have remained in France, as it was most likely sold in the 1877 Paris auction, whereas Lucas and Avery bought works of art in Europe specifically for the American market. Furthermore, Avery ordered the painting rather than buy a finished picture, and the particular composition of *The Dream of a Eunuch* might
Of Dreams and Drugs

_The Sleep of the Chieftain_ (Le kief du schérif, ca. 1873; fig. 86; cat. 86) depicts a reclining man smoking a water pipe. As such, it can be characterized as an Orientalist genre scene, and not necessarily an illustration of the text by Montesquieu that underlies _The Dream of a Eunuch_ and _The Dream of Cosrou_. The subtitle _Souvenir d'Orient_, featured in the 1877 auction catalogue, refers to the artist’s own visit to Cairo, where he would have seen both this exotic architecture and people smoking water pipes or hallucinatory drugs. The subject of Oriental men and women smoking was treated by Lecomte du Nouy many times in works like _A Pottery Merchant in Cairo_ (Marchand de poteries au Caire, 1869; fig. 89; cat. 56), and was common to much Orientalist art. Yet _The Dream of a Eunuch_ and _The Dream of Cosrou_ can be distinguished from such genre scenes in their literary origins and but especially because of the actual depiction of the drug-induced hallucinations. It is not known whether Lecomte du Nouy experienced such hallucinations himself, although it would have easily been possible for him. Even if he had never traveled abroad, substances like morphine, hashish, and opium had found their way to Western Europe by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Although the use of such drugs was legal until the early twentieth century, the negative consequences of addiction still carried a social stigma before then. But it did not prevent drugs from becoming popular, especially in artistic circles. In 1845, the Parisian painter Fernand Boissard de Boisdenier (1813-66) founded the _Club des Hachichins_, (The Club of the Hashish Smokers) where artists and writers gathered regularly to consume hashish and discuss its effects. That same year, the medical doctor Jacques Joseph Moreau of Tours published _Du haschisch et de l'aliénation mentale_ (On Hashish and Mental Alienation), the first study dedicated to this drug. In this book, Moreau twice noted that the consumption of hashish allowed access to the paradise of the Prophet. As early as 1821, the British author Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859) published his _Confessions of an English Opium Eater_, and Théophile Gautier’s _La pipe d'opium_ was published in 1838

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Not yet have been established in the summer of 1873, possibly explaining the generic description in the diary. Although the early provenance of the Cleveland painting is unknown, it is a work that could well have been in the United States soon after its creation.

119 Davenport-Hines 2002, especially chapter three.
120 Julien Cendres’ postscript to Baudelaire 1851, p. 54.
and his *Le Club des Hachichins* in 1846.\textsuperscript{121} When the cartoonist Cham caricatured Lecomte du Nouy's 1875 Salon version of the subject, *The Dream of the Chieftan* for the comical publication *Le Salon pour rire* (fig. 90), he also focused on the painting's illustration of drug use, stating: "*Le Haschich! Eh! Eh! On lui finirait volontiers sa pipe!*" (Hashish! One would gladly finish his pipe!).

Lecomte du Nouy thoroughly transformed *The Sleep of the Chieftain* (fig. 86) in two subsequent compositions, not only by adding the actual hallucination, but by infusing the literary prestige of *Lettres persanes*. In keeping with academic principles, the artist thus elevated his composition from a mere genre scene to a more complex pseudo-history painting with additional layers of meaning. Depicting the consumption of hallucinatory drugs apparently posed no offence to public decency, whereas nudity was traditionally attempted only in literary, mythological, or biblical guises. Lecomte du Nouy adapted the compositions of his two versions of this subject to their intended purposes: one was made for a private collector, while the other was meant for the salon.

In his representation of dreams and apparitions, Lecomte du Nouy built upon a long pictorial tradition. Ingres and others had depicted the poet Ossian dreaming (1812-13, Musée Ingres, Montauban), and the well-established genre of Victorian fairy painting reflected its creators' experiments with hallucinogens of various kinds.\textsuperscript{122} Apart from Lecomte du Nouy's own possible experience of hallucinatory drugs, he is likely to have seen the drug-induced vision painted by Achille Zo (1826-1901), *The Dream of a Believer* (ca. 1870; fig. 91), exhibited at the Salon of 1870. Zo depicted the delirium of a turbaned man, a vision that seems to emerge from the smoke from his water pipe. He dreams of the Islamic paradise, where true believers reside happily forever in total bliss, and where there is a limitless supply of female beauties for sexual pleasure.

A comparable iconography can be seen on a nineteenth-century ivory miniature (fig. 92).\textsuperscript{123} Even though Lecomte du Nouy may not have known this particular object, it reveals the prevalence of such motifs. A bearded man is seen exhaling the smoke from a cigar, which develops into the upper torso of a naked woman. The strings of pearls in her

\textsuperscript{121} See the introduction by Robert Chesnais to the edition of these two stories by Théophile Gautier, published in the series *L'esprit frappeur*, no. 6 (Paris 1998).

\textsuperscript{122} On this subject see: *Victorian Fairy Painting* 1997-98, especially the paintings by John Anster Fitzgerald (1823-1906), p. 36-39.

\textsuperscript{123} Guégan 1997, repr. p. 96, in this publication, the miniature has been attributed to Théophile Gautier.
hair and on her body indicate that she is an Oriental woman and the welcoming gesture of
her hand suggests that she is the willing subject of the man’s erotic fantasy. An
engraving by the British artist Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827) titled The Harem was an
extreme example of this iconography (ca. 1810; fig. 93). It depicts a turbaned man in a
state of arousal, smoking his chibouk and facing a seemingly endless array of female
nudes.

In a picture from very late in his career, Lecomte du Nouy returned to the motif of
a man reclining on a terrace beneath a starlit sky, smoking a water pipe and experiencing
a drug-induced vision. In An Oriental Dream (Rêve d’Orient, 1904; fig. 94; cat. 304),
however, the artist no longer bases his theme on Montesquieu and he comes closer in
concept to Zo’s painting. Montgaillard relates that Lecomte du Nouy was inspired here
by Gautier’s La Mille et Deuxième Nuit (The One Thousand and Second Night, 1842). A peri (a supernatural being in Persian folklore) descends on a beam of light from an
assembly of heavenly creatures to the poet Hassan as he is dreaming on his terrace. This
picture is closely related to an oil sketch (fig. 95) in an album that Lecomte du Nouy
named Souvenirs de voyages, esquisses (Memories of my Travels, sketches). Lecomte
du Nouy made many such sketches during his travels, and he used them throughout his
career. These more or less elaborate sketches, as well as the numerous sketchbooks filled
with simple pencil drawings, form a veritable catalogue of motifs that supported his
memory long after he had witnessed or conceived them. Whereas the Hassan sketch
already clearly depicts a fictional encounter, most of these sketches are straightforward
records of scenery the artist observed on his journeys abroad, like the beautiful view of
rooftops in an Eastern town (fig. 96).

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124 Another picture with similar iconography was presented in the Paris sale, Hotel Drouot. Orientalisme, 12 March 1999, lot 258, Jules Ravel (1826-1898) Turc rêvant des houris. Oil on panel, 55 x 41 cm, repr. in color.
125 Montgaillard 1906, p. 84.
126 See appendix II, no. 59. I earlier discussed this oil sketch in d’Argencourt and Diederen 1999, cat. no. 135.
127 The Musée d’Art et d’Archéologie in Aurillac possesses some 20 travel sketchbooks from the artist, as
well as a large group of oil sketches and preparatory drawings, see appendix I.
Perceptions of Barbaric Violence

Henri Bouchot, curator of prints at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, contributed a preface to Guy de Montgailhard’s 1906 biography of Lecomte du Nouy which addressed some of the issues discussed above and singled out violence as a prevalent characteristic of Oriental cultures. He described Lecomte du Nouy’s work as follows:

One understands that the Orient, with its magic, its hashish and dreams, and that the African Egypt with its brutal light, and Asia with its Hebrew sentimentalities were his favorite places. The paradise of Mohammed and the promises of the Koran form the main subject matter of his compositions, sometimes mild, sometimes cruel. Because the Orient is more than just eunuchs sleeping at the gate of a seraglio [fig. 101], there are savage ones. There is his Pharaoh, a major and troubling work, where everything is designed for maximum drama and the splendid contrasts; the tranquility of a beautiful night and the rage of a human jackal, lolling in despair on his couch, amidst the cadavers of his Bearers of Bad Tidings [fig. 82]. I don’t think that many works have so far tormented and moved us as much, indifferent as we all are.128

Lecomte du Nouy expressed this perception of Oriental cruelty in various ways. In The Dream of a Eunuch (fig. 87) and The Dream of Cosrou (fig. 88), for example, Lecomte du Nouy characterized the Orient as an erotic paradise, as Zo and Rowlandson had done (figs. 91, 93). But his images were more ambiguous. With his representation of Cosrou, Lecomte du Nouy shifted the viewer’s attention from Oriental pleasures to Oriental barbarity, as in The Bearers of Bad Tidings (fig. 82). One might even argue that the apparition of both the teasing female nude and the bloodstained knife in his two eunuch paintings symbolizes the male fear of castration. And in this context, how should the red hand painted directly beside the artist’s signature in The Dream of a Eunuch (fig. 87) be interpreted? The motif is that of a khamsa, referring to the Arab word for five, and was intended to avert evil.129 The artist had already represented several of these khamsas

128 From Bouchot’s introduction to Montgailhard 1906, p. x-xi; for the French text see cat. 64.
129 Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition (Leiden 1978), vol. IV, p. 1009, Khamsa: “five” still possesses, in several Muslim countries, as amongst peoples of ancient times, a magical value in connection with the use of the fingers of the hand as a defense against the evil eye. [...] Various representations of the hand, which were formerly current also in ancient civilizations, may be attached to this belief. One of the best-known is the piece of jewellery called “the hand of Fatma”, used as an amulet and called khamsa etc., but one often
on a wall in his 1867 painting *The Dancing Fellah Woman* (fig. 21) and they still appear frequently in Islamic countries today. If Lecomte du Nouy was aware of the meaning of the *khamsa*, might the placing of this symbol so close to his own signature be read as a sign intended to ward off violence?

While paintings referring to or actually presenting scenes of exotic brutality, like *The Dream of a Eunuch* and *The Bearers of Bad Tidings* are clearly embedded in stereotypes about extinct and foreign cultures, they were also popular with the public. This is presumably why violence recurs regularly in *néo-grec* and especially Orientalist painting. Europeans had long envisioned Oriental warriors as fierce enemies in vicious battles with native and Western foes. This idea had been cultivated through images of crusaders clashing with infidels, as well as of the Turks’ repeated attacks on the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Spain. Moreover, the related notion of Muslim cruelty and despotism were implicitly understood as indicators of that society’s low level of civilization. This attitude is discernible in the reviews by Dubosc de Pesquidoux and Strahan of *The Bearers of Bad Tidings* (cat. 64), as well as Bouchot’s assessment of Lecomte du Nouy’s *oeuvre* in general. Henri Regnault’s (1843-1871) *The Execution without Judgment under the Moorish Kings of Granada* (1870; fig. 97), with its extremely graphic representation of a decapitation and the title emphasizing the injustice of the situation, conveyed a similar message. In 1866 Gérôme had exhibited an equally gruesome painting showing two guards flanking a pile of severed heads titled *Doorway to the Mosque El Assaneyn in Cairo where the heads of the Rebel Beys were exposed by Salek-Kachef*. Although no finished painting of a similar subject by Lecomte du Nouy is known, he did make a small oil sketch of a guard in a doorway beside a group of severed heads (fig. 98).

In a similar vein, Alexandre Cabanel’s *Cleopatra Testing Poisons on Prisoners Condemned to Death* (1887; fig. 99) can be interpreted as the feminine counterpart to *The Bearers of Bad Tidings*. The painting, based on an anecdote drawn from Plutarch’s *Lives* (Anthony, chapter LXXI.4), depicts the Egyptian queen preparing for her own suicide,

finds, on the walls of houses and elsewhere, the mark of a henna-painted hand, or a more schematic pattern with five branches. […].” (Various bibliographic references are given in this entry.)

130 See note 128.

131 Ackerman 2000, cat. 161 and 161.4. The work was sold at Christie’s London, June 19, 2003 (lot 18). It has even been suggested that the dangling heads resemble Gérôme’s critics.
calmly watching prisoners suffering the result of various poisons they are forced to swallow, while the body of one casualty is being carried away. Like pharaoh’s frivolous violence in Lecomte du Nouy’s picture, Cleopatra’s capricious cruelty here is intended to stir the viewer’s moral indignation, albeit with a degree of morbid fascination. Beyond representing an absolute ruler who could dispose of others at will, Cabanel played on the public’s perception of this historical figure as a femme fatale. This idea of the ruthless Eastern woman was central to various depictions of the harem, including some of those by Lecomte du Nouy.

Inside the Harem

Derived from the Arab word harim, “harem” refers to the apartments for women in a Muslim household, an area that was strictly off limits to outsiders, especially Western men. This restriction naturally did not prevent Lecomte du Nouy and many of his colleagues from depicting this inner sanctum and its inhabitants. On the contrary, the very impenetrability of the harem only heightened their curiosity and fueled lively imaginings of what went on behind its walls. The Dancing Fellah Woman (fig. 21) was Lecomte du Nouy’s first painting of a woman that was clearly intended to provide erotically charged entertainment for a male audience, yet it was not actually set in a harem. The scene occurs under a star-lit sky. The artist also made a small oil sketch of the exterior of The Harem of Gesireh in Cairo (not dated; fig. 100) and then depicted the guards at The Gate of the Harem, Souvenir of Cairo (La porte du sérail, 1876; fig. 101; cat. 116). The critic Ernest Boisse noted that:

The Gate of the Harem is a locked and carefully guarded gate; as one will see, it is preceded by a staircase of a few steps at the bottom of which there are five or six black men, whose belts hold many pistols and daggers. The sun begins to color the minarets, whose spires reach to the end of the canvas. The guards have just woken up and have lit their first pipes or cigarettes. At the top of the staircase, in front of the gate, kneels their chief and next to him a black panther with green eyes stretches out in the first beams of daylight. In the courtyard of a palace, a stork frisks about near a reflecting pool. This painting, which touches upon one of the mysterious sides of eastern life, is a remarkable
work due to its charming and harmonious coloring, and because of the curious robust figures to whom the master confidently entrusts the guarding of his wives.\textsuperscript{132}

In 1885, Lecomte du Nouy started work on a triptych titled \textit{Ramses in his Harem} (Ramsès dans son harem; fig. 102, 102a; cat. 201) that, like \textit{The Bearers of Bad Tidings} (fig. 82), was inspired by Gautier's \textit{Le roman de la momie}. Far less suggestive and psychologically compelling than its predecessor, \textit{Ramses in his Harem} shows pharaoh playing a board game with one of his mistresses, while others dance and play music. The critic Alfred Delilia found it "A marvelous antique document. According to Théophile Gautier's story, pharaoh, surrounded by his women Amensé, Taïa, and Hont-Reché, plays chess with the beautiful Twea. And Mr. Lecomte du Nouy recreated this charming scene with an exquisite art. No one but the eminent artist could better render these black, yellow, green, and brown physiognomies, and discover more cleverly under the transparent gauzes the nudes in which he excels."

Judith Gautier (1845-1917), daughter of Théophile Gautier and his mistress (the contralto Ernesta Grisi), was a prolific writer and critic who played an active role in the cultural life of her time.\textsuperscript{134} Tutored by a Chinese man, she eventually translated Chinese poetry and wrote several Orientalist novels. She was also an important promoter of Wagner's music and the first female elected to the Académie-Goncourt. Lecomte du Nouy dedicated to Judith Gautier an imaginary portrait of Tahoser, pharaoh's love interest in her father's novel,\textsuperscript{135} and also illustrated some of her writings.\textsuperscript{136} Judith Gautier's favorable opinion of \textit{Ramses in his Harem} may well have been influenced by these associations, but it nonetheless constitutes a contemporary reaction from a leading intellectual. It is interesting to note that, as a woman, Judith does not seem to have been peturbed by the pervasive display of scantily clad female beauties who lived to serve. Indeed, she may well have seen in it a reflection of her own fictional approach to the East, one that similarly blended historical research and artistic fantasy:

\textsuperscript{132} Boisse, cited from Montgailhard 1906, p. 121; for the French text see cat. 116. Houssaye 1877, gives a less positive view of the picture, for the French text see cat. 116.
\textsuperscript{133} Delilia 1887, p. 647; for the French text see cat. 201.
\textsuperscript{134} For a biography see, Richardson 1987.
\textsuperscript{135} Reproduced in Montgailhard 1906, p. 63. See also Aurillac: 82.13.89, appendix I.
[The picture’s] first impression is so dazzling and so fresh that it looks like a bunch of flowers wet from the rain. Pharaoh is in the women’s apartments and plays chess with the beautiful Twéa. His favorite women, Amensé, Taña, and Hout-Reché are grouped around them. An alabaster in the Louvre, the portrait of Amenophis IV probably from the time of Moses, has served the painter as the model for rendering the pharaoh from the novel [fig. 103]. His slightly strange feminine beauty gives him an extraordinary charm. Very young, beardless, with long clear eyes, pure and open features, and a serious mouth: he has a physiognomy that is “relentlessly soft and of a granite-like serenity.” His head is dressed with a black wig plaited on one side and a short front with the symbolic viper; from his naked bronze-colored chest hangs a gold necklace over an enameled breastplate, and his nipples are encircled with a blue tattoo. The attentive and meditative young girl who plays chess with the king is delightful. Seen in profile, she kneels close to the chessboard, one leg folded under her, and, despite her nudity, and adorned merely with a black and white belt around her waist and a papyrus bloom on her front, she is of a charming chasteness. Amensé, with silk-blue hair, coiffed in a sort of helmet with feathers of guinea fowl, leans forward in order to follow the game. Taña, a grenade flower behind her ear, holds a polished mirror with a nice mischievous gesture, and Hout-Reché lies on pillows, her neck resting on a wooden half-moon (a slightly hard support, but it prevents the floral creation in her hair from being crushed), looks vaguely at the play of sunlight through the wooden lattice work of the window. How many interesting and accurate details might one study endlessly while resting one’s elbows on the picture rail: the hardwood chessboard with feet that turn into the claws of a jackal, the peculiarly shaped chess pieces in green enameled ivory, the mats, the jewelry, the fabrics, the architecture, and much more. This painting of such pure design and with such beautiful light certainly repeats the success of the other canvas by Mr. Lecomte du Nouy inspired by the same novel, The Bearers of Bad Tidings [fig. 82], which is currently at the musée du Luxembourg.  

Some fifteen years later, Lecomte du Nouy revisited the subject of a pharaoh in his harem in The Sadness of Pharaoh (La tristesse de pharaon, 1901; fig. 104; cat. 290). Montgailhard writes that the painter envisioned this as an Egyptian pendant to Ingres’s famous Stratonice (1840, Musée Condé, Chantilly), which features an ancient Greek interior. Inspired by Gautier’s line “Qui donc a pris le coeur de notre maître?” (“Who has stolen the heart of our master?”), pharaoh is seen here on his throne, immersed in a sorrow that blinds him to the women who patiently wait for him. It seems that the artist had interrupted work on this picture to visit Egypt, and it is clear that

137 Aurillac: 82.13.1 and 82.13.22; see appendix I.
138 Cited from Montgailhard 1906, p. 60-61; for the French text see cat. 201.
139 The artist Maurice Denis questioned this work in his Salon review as follows: “In order to satisfy what archeological passion persists Mr. Lecomte du Nouy in drawing dryly, yet not without elegance, models in Egyptian costumes? Under the pretext to tell us, for example, the Sadness of Pharaoh?) Denis 1913, p. 77; for the French text see cat. 290.
140 Montgailhard 1906, p. 83.
sketches he made from an ancient interior at Fayoum informed the archeological details in the final composition of this work.  

Both Egyptian harem scenes allowed Lecomte du Nouy to depict a range of female beauties in various poses, even as they appeased his relentless desire to recreate historic settings. Although it is difficult to judge their merit only through photographs, these works seem to lack both narrative and compositional originality. They relate closely to his earlier masterpiece *The Bearers of Bad Tidings* (fig. 82) in focusing on the mood of pharaoh, whose ruthlessness made the earliest composition unforgettable; in all three paintings the artist implies that, despite the absolute power of the pharaoh and his control of countless women, true love and happiness have eluded him.

*The White Slave* (L’esclave blanche, 1888)

*The White Slave* (fig. 105; cat. 219), showing a harem interior of a more intimate character, is perhaps Lecomte du Nouy’s best-known picture. It is often reproduced in current literature on Orientalism and even serves to promote a wide range of commercial products. In both subject matter and composition, the artist once more pays tribute here to Ingres and Gérôme. A more generic kinship might also be established with Cabanel’s red-haired beauty *Albaydé* (1848, Musée Fabre, Montpellier), an image inspired by one of Victor Hugo’s poems in *Les Orientales*. As in Ingres’s and Gérôme’s odaliscques and scenes of bathers, Lecomte du Nouy concentrated in this work on leisure in the luxurious setting of the harem. This bejeweled pale woman with abundant red hair seductively smokes a cigarette, admiring the curvilinear plumes of smoke emerging from her pouting lips. An elaborate meal has been served in precious dishes and two black female servants are washing laundry in a marble basin. Like the orange seen in the lower right corner, neatly peeled and divided into bite-size portions, Lecomte du Nouy offers up this concubine for his viewers’ consumption, barely covering her body with a beautifully embroidered shawl.

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141 Aurillac: 82.13.243, appendix I, is an Egyptian sketch dated 1901.
142 For a recent discussion of Cabanel’s painting see Sylvain Amic in, Bonfait 2003, p. 405-406, repr.
Like many of Lecomte du Nouy’s Orientalist pictures, this one reflects an amalgam of influences and elements. In two preparatory drawings, the artist established the basic pose of the central female figure, including the plume of smoke escaping from her mouth. Art historian Marie-Colette Depierré has linked the figure’s particular pose to the twelfth stanza in Gautier’s _Le poème de la femme_ (1849): “La Géorgienne indolente, / Avec son souple narguilé, / Etalant sa hanche opulente, / Un pied sous l’autre replié.” (The indolent woman from Georgia, / With her flexible hookah, / Displaying her opulent hip, / One foot folded beneath the other.) A passage from Gustave Flaubert’s _Salammbo_ (1862) might also apply here: “Presque toujours, elle était accroupie au fond de son appartement, tenant dans ses mains sa jambe gauche repliée, la bouche entr’ouverte, le menton baissé, l’œil fixe.” (Almost continuously she squatted in the back of her apartment, holding her bent left leg with her hand, her mouth slightly open, her chin lowered, her gaze fixed.) Other elements in the composition have also been identified: the pillows and the fabrics worn by the servants are African and Middle Eastern, while the embroidered cloth under the dishes and the carved spoon appear to be Romanian (Lecomte du Nouy might have obtained them while visiting his brother in Romania), and the bowl holding dates in the foreground displays Hindu motifs. Although luxury goods were actively traded throughout the Ottoman Empire, it is most likely that Lecomte du Nouy simply assembled disparate props that he felt would result in an appealing composition. The title of the painting refers to the racial distinction among the three slaves depicted and the disparity in their monetary value. By 1888 the Ottomans had almost ceased their trade in white slaves from Georgia and Circassia, yet this picture still documents the practice and indeed the fact that a white slave was spared manual labor in order to perform other duties.

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143 Aurillac: 82.13.48 and 82.13.48, see appendix I.
144 _Le poème de la femme_ forms part of Théophile Gautier’s, _Émaux et Camées_ (Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1981). The link between the picture and these literary sources was made in the unpublished study, Depierré 1980, p. 176.
145 Depierré 1980, p. 176. These same findings have been published in _Orients_ 1982, cat. no. 30.
The White Slave received generally favorable press; apart from a critic who argued that the woman did not “live,” the popular illustrated journals were quite taken by her. While reviewing depictions of the nude at the Salon of 1888, Théophile Sylvestre wondered whether or not this woman’s captivity in the service of male pleasure should be pitied. His ultimately negative answer illustrates the way in which a nineteenth-century man could assume his readers’ agreement on the subordinate position of women in society. Indeed, Sylvestre’s commentary can be regarded as the written counterpoint to the very painting it discussed. The White Slave reminded him of a specific love poem, and although he went so far as to imagine that the woman might be missing her lover at home, he did not think it necessary to pity her, implying that her ultimate role was to please and live for the higher purpose of love:

Pity her? Why? Isn’t caring for her beauty enough to fill her days, does she not have, to reflect her charm, the running water that repeats to her as it falls in the resonant basin:

The song that the morning sings  
And that the night teaches the day,  
The plaintive and touching song,  
The eternal song of love!  

The White Slave reminded Sylvestre of a poem, and it also inspired the writing of a new one by Edmond Haraucourt, who later provided a perceptive assessment of Lecomte du Nouy’s oeuvre:

What a strange psychology one might construe from this haughty and rapt personality, which appears frigid because of its austerity and troubles one through the sheer pride that emanates from his works. One easily understands that the art of Mr. Lecomte du Nouy does not please most people, but no one passes by his canvasses with indifference; they impose a respect, and the vague restlessness that emanates from things with which one communicates uneasily, things that one only penetrates after a long study. The painting of Mr. Lecomte du Nouy recalls that of Ingres; it has its qualities and its shortcomings, its

147 Criron 1888, p. 1052; for the French text see cat. 219.  
148 Henri Boucher, cited from Montgailhard 1906, p. 129; for the French text see cat. 196.  
149 For the complete poem and text see cat. 219.  
150 See cat. 219. For a similar poem by Dézamy, see cat. 102.
purity and its excessive neatness. One is particularly aware of this artistic legacy when standing in front of The White Slave.¹⁵¹

*The Orientals* (Les Orientales, 1885)

A harem scene of a wholly different character best exemplifies Lecomte du Nouy’s representation of Eastern violence. Europeans fantasized about the eunuchs who had suffered from the whims of despot, as well as jealousy among the members of the harem, and the resulting cruelty and intrigue. This male construction of female vice found its expression in many canvasses, among them Fernand Cormon’s (1845-1924) *Jealousy in the Seraglio* (1874, fig. 106) and Théodore Ralli’s (1852-1909) *Drama in the Harem* (Salon of 1908, fig. 107).¹⁵² Such lurid imaginings clearly informed one of the four pictures in Lecomte du Nouy’s Hugo-cycle, *Les Orientales* (fig. 57; cat. 186), based on the collection of poems published by Victor Hugo in 1829 under the same title. In a richly decorated interior, a sultan reclines as a naked woman with a satisfied, villainous smile leans over him. A slave, clenching a sharp dagger in his mouth, presents the sultan with a platter containing the severed heads of two of the woman’s rival concubines. Hugo had formulated this whimsical act of bloodshed as follows: “N’ai-je pas pour toi, belle Juive, / Assez dépeuplé mon sérail? / Souffre qu’enfin le reste vive. / Faut-il qu’un coup de hache suive / Chaque coup de ton éventail?” (Have I not for you, beautiful Jewess, / depopulated my harem sufficiently? / Suffer, so the others can finally live. / Is it necessary that an ax falls / after every bat of your fan?)¹⁵³

Rather than merely illustrating Hugo’s verse, Lecomte du Nouy created a picture in which elements of sexual desire, violence, and intrigue form a delicate mélange that at once attracts and repulses, just like the biblical story of the femme fatale Salomé, to whom this work certainly alludes.¹⁵⁴ Here again, the distinction between chronological

¹⁵¹ Harucourt, cited from Montgailhard 1906, p. 61-62; for the French text see cat. 219.
¹⁵² The painting by Ralli was sold at Sotheby’s, New York, November 3, 1999, lot 46, *Jalousie*, oil on canvas, 72.4 x 50.2 cm. The 1908 Salon catalogue (Société des Artistes Français) published by Ludovic Baschet, reproduces Ralli’s *Drame au Harem*, which seems identical to the painting sold at this Sotheby’s auction.
¹⁵³ The first stanza of Hugo’s poem “La Sultane Favorite”, no. XII in *Les Orientales* (1829).
¹⁵⁴ The museum in Aurillac keeps a small oilsketch of a woman holding a tray containing a round object, probably a representation of Salomé holding the head of John the Baptist (Aurillac: 82.13.230, see
and geographical distance becomes blurred. For the Middle East was perceived by artists of this period as an ideal setting for generic historical images, and for biblical tales in particular. While Cabanel had a very concrete historical reference point for his fantastical conception of Cleopatra's cruelty (fig. 99), Lecomte du Nouÿ even departed from Hugo's fictional presentation of the theme to create yet another bizarrely intriguing composition. As in The Bearers of Bad Tidings (fig. 82), in The Orientals he has developed a scene designed to incite the public's indignation, and hence its attention, through its exoticism, eroticism, and cruelty. Its large format and status within a series of canvasses illustrating Hugo's literary œuvre, no less than the clear allusion to the biblical Salomé, all confirm Lecomte du Nouÿ's ongoing predilection for traditional history painting and its underlying academic principles.

IV. RELIGION AND REPORTAGE

Many nineteenth-century traveled to Egypt, Palestine and other Middle Eastern lands not only to learn about ancient cultures, but also because they believed that firsthand experiences there would enable them to better imagine the landscapes and customs of biblical times, and subsequently render more historically accurate religious paintings.155 In this regard artists were following a trend established by scholars and scientists exploring biblical history. In 1865, for example, a group of British academics and clergymen founded the Palestine Exploration Fund with the purpose of researching the culture, topography, and geology of biblical Palestine and the Levant. Lecomte du Nouÿ was a practicing Roman Catholic and this seems to have partly motivated his own travels. Several sketches testify to his religious beliefs, like the one he made of a hand carrying a globe, with the caption: "Le monde est dans la main de Dieu." (The world is in the hand of God.)156

appendix I). See also Henri Regnault's depiction of Salomé in a richly decorated Orientalist setting (1870, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art). See also the chapter "Gold and the Virgin Whores of Babylon; Judith and Salome: The Priestesses of Man's Severed Head," in, Dijkstra 1986.
156 Aurillac: 82.13.34, see appendix I.
If nineteenth-century artists established connections between archeological finds and contemporary Middle Eastern customs and dress, they also used biblical references to describe or explain unfamiliar sights and events encountered on their journeys abroad. The local populations of these countries were believed to continue traditions described in the Testaments; and Montgailhard, for example, recounted Lecomte du Nouy’s trip to Morocco in the following words: “A trip to Tanger lay ahead, and Lecomte du Nouy was eager to visit a country free from all European influence. As soon as he set foot on Moroccan soil he was charmed by the picturesque costumes, and specifically by the clothing of the local Jews, which united a rich variety of silk, velvet, gold, and jewels. In Tetouan, where he arrived on horseback, a Jew grabbed his stirrup, as in the Bible, helped him to descend, and told him while opening his house for him: “You are at home.”

In addition to painting traditional religious pictures that represent specific passages from the Bible, Lecomte du Nouy also created Oriental genre scenes of Christians and non-Christians practicing their beliefs. This sort of painting usually had a strong ethnographic component and became popular subject among Western artists traveling to the Middle East. Indeed, it was one of the prevailing sub-categories within Orientalist art. With a defined number of official commissions for more traditional religious works, such as altarpieces and other church decorations, ethnographical religious genre paintings not only formed a welcome alternative for artists, but also reflected a strong demand from private collectors. Examples of works in both categories by Lecomte du Nouy are discussed here.

*Job and his Friends* (Job et ses amis, 1867)

At the 1867 Salon, Lecomte du Nouy exhibited his first biblical painting, *Job and his Friends* (fig. 108; cat. 30); it was accompanied in the catalogue by a citation from the Book of Job (“Mais Job répondit et dit: J’ai souvent entendu de pareils discours. Vous êtes tous des consolateurs fâcheux.” (Livre de Job, chap. XVI.) (“But Job responded and said: I have heard many such things. Miserable comforters are you all!”)). The prologue tells how Satan, with God’s permission, tried Job with severe afflictions in order to test

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157 Montgailhard 1906, p. 49.
his virtue. Job bore six great temptations in succession, with heroic patience and without the slightest murmuring against God or wavering in his loyalty to him. Then Job’s three friends, Eliphaz, Baldad, and Sophar came to console him, their visit being the seventh and greatest trial, as they believed his own actions had caused his misfortune.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Lecomte du Nouy’s rendition was criticized for its lack of visual excitement. Nonetheless, the composition demonstrates that he relied upon memories of his first journey to Egypt in 1865. Although the three men at right could easily have figured in any classical or mythological scene, the ruinous structures and the crouching figure in the center of the composition suggest the influence of Lecomte de Nouy’s direct observations in Egypt. A sheet with various studies for the subject supports this impression (fig. 109). The sketch in the lower right corner of this sheet depicts a crouching figure in an Eastern setting, similar to the one in the painting. Further, at the 1867 Salon the artist also showed *The Dancing Fellah Woman* (fig. 22; cat. 31), which, according to the information in the catalogue, was inspired by his visit to Kaphra in Egypt in 1865.

In addition to the reviews of Job referred to in Chapter I, the cartoonist Cham also commented on the picture. Cham’s caricatures after Salon paintings were, by definition, not complimentary, yet he provided an interesting insight by exaggerating the three figures at right into seemingly Oriental figures wearing kaftans (fig. 110). In his caption, Cham changed Job into a character from Léon Laya’s popular comedy *Le duc Job* (1859). It seems that, for once, Lecomte du Nouy may have inspired his master Gérôme; his Job anticipates the older artist’s 1874 rendition of *Saint Jerome* (fig. 111), which also features a very similar reclining, barely clad old man. On the other hand, Job’s three friends in Lecomte du Nouy’s painting seem to have been derived from the toga-clad men at right in Gérôme’s famous *Phryné before the Areopagus* (1861; fig. 112).

Two Altarpieces for the Église de la Sainte-Trinité, Paris (1873-79)

In 1873, Lecomte du Nouy received a commission from the State and the City of Paris to paint two altarpieces for the Église de la Sainte-Trinité. The parish had been

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158 Ackerman 2000, p. 284-85, cat. no. 237, repr.
established in 1851 and the church building, located at place d'Estienne-d'Orves in the IX arrondissement, was executed between 1861 and 1867. The completion of the interior decoration lasted another decade, and the paintings for the side chapels were installed between 1875 and 1880. The painters of the other chapels in the church included Louis François (1814-1897), Michel Dumas (1812-1885), Félix Barrias (1822-1907), Élie Delaunay (1828-1891) and Émile Lévy (1826-1890). Lecomte du Nouy was asked to decorate the side chapel dedicated to Saint Vincent de Paul (1576/-80-1660), who had been revered for his charitable efforts. From the saint’s eventful life, Lecomte du Nouy extracted two episodes: *Saint Vincent de Paul Bringing the Galley Slaves to the Faith* (1876; fig. 113, cat. 111) and, *Saint Vincent de Paul Helping the Inhabitants of Lorraine after the War of 1637* (1879, fig. 114; cat. 139). The saint enjoyed great popularity among Parisian Catholics, and Léon Bonnat had painted a similar altarpiece for the Church of Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs in 1865, titled *Saint Vincent de Paul Taking the Place of a Galley Slave* (fig. 115).

Lecomte du Nouy’s first painting in the church relates to Vincent de Paul’s care for convicts consigned to the galleys. Before reaching their ships, or when illness compelled them to disembark, the convicts were kept in dungeons under miserable conditions. Vincent de Paul visited the galley convicts of Paris, Marseilles, and Bordeaux regularly and converted many to Catholicism. He established a hospital for them in Paris and was appointed royal almoner of the galleys by Louis XIII. The second altarpiece relates to the saint’s charitable activities in the eastern French regions of Alsace and Lorraine; these areas suffered severely during the Thirty Years War (1618-48). Vincent de Paul engaged the Sisters of Charity, an order founded in the wake of his activities, to assist him. When contributions lagged, he published horrific accounts of scenes in the disaster areas and organized soup kitchens. Importantly, Lecomte de Nouy’s altarpiece alluded to recent contemporary events, reminding French audiences of the Prussian occupation of Lorraine since the ending of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870.

A number of preliminary designs for these altarpieces provide insight into the artist’s working method. A single extant oil sketch by Lecomte de Nouy shows two preparatory studies for the altarpieces, side by side, suggesting that they were

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commissioned and conceived together, even though the final canvasses would be executed several years apart (fig. 116). Two larger, individual oil sketches show more defined compositions, and are not only distinct from the earlier single sketch in a variety of ways, but are also quite different from the final painted altarpieces (figs. 113 and 114). Once the artist had settled on the designs for these works, he made many oil sketches illustrating the details of the figures’ faces and bodies (fig. 119). In the sketch for the composition of the 1876 altarpiece, the figure of the saint commands more attention than he does in the final painting (fig. 117). Initially, he stands gesturing dramatically, raising a crucifix in his left hand and pointing upward with his right hand to an apparition of the Virgin. He is dressed in a bright white cassock, and a galley slave kneels forward to kiss his foot. In the final painting, however, Vincent de Paul is dressed in a sober black outfit and opens his arms in a humbly welcoming gesture. The kneeling slave has been omitted here, leaving an empty space in the center of the composition. As a result, the diagonal formed by the group of convicts is more strongly defined and leads the eye toward the main figure. By replacing the white garments of several figures, Lecomte du Nouy darkened the picture’s overall tone, an effect he may have sought to more convincingly convey the squalid environment. The upper half of the painting is devoted to the supernatural appearance of the Virgin and Child, enthroned in the realm of heaven. While the oil sketch shows only these two figures hovering on clouds, the artist flanked them in the altarpiece with John the Baptist and two singing angels. Lecomte du Nouy made a visual connection here between earthly misery and heavenly salvation through the image of an angel holding the Eucharist, positioned immediately behind Vincent de Paul. With this image of the Madonna enthroned, the artist saw himself as sustaining the prestigious iconographic tradition of religious painting by Raphael and Ingres.

The 1879 altarpiece shows comparable changes in relation to the preparatory sketch. The sketch depicts a street covered in snow, to underscore the wretched conditions of the poorly clothed and starving citizens (fig. 118). Vincent de Paul, with the assistance of the Sisters of Charity and a devout rich lady, is seen handing out bread to the poor. Lecomte de Nouy’s omission of snow in the final altarpiece may have been for purely aesthetic reasons: large areas of white, like the white garments he took out of the final version of the first altarpiece, might have drawn undue attention to minor parts of
the composition. As a pendant to the Virgin and Child in the first altarpiece, the upper half of the Lorraine picture features a triumphant Christ and angels holding a banner reading 1637 – Lorraine – Alsace – 1648. Here again, the artist provided a visual link between the earthly and heavenly spheres by placing a large crucifix at the center of the composition.

Before the first altarpiece was installed in the chapel, it was presented at the 1876 Salon; the entry in the catalogue included the abbreviation: M. INST. P. ET B.-A., indicating that the work had been commissioned by the Ministry of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, then led by Philippe de Chennevières, Directeur des Beaux-Arts. In his review of the 1878 Exposition Universelle, Strahan commented: “At the Salon of 1876, M. Lecomte du Nouy met his greatest triumph, receiving the ribbon of a chevalier of the order of the Legion of Honor. His pictures that season were the “Begging Homer” […] and “St. Vincent de Paul in the Church of the Trinity at Paris; it is exhibited in the Pavilion of the City of Paris.” Yet, as noted earlier, the critic Castagnary saw this as further evidence of the government’s outdated system of commissions and surely viewed the awards merely as state acts of self-congratulation.

Once again, the critics were divided in their responses to this work. Edmond About was a spokesperson for the conservative Conseil supérieur des beaux-arts (High Council on the Fine Arts), an organization that championed religious painting, yet he was also famously anticlerical. He faulted the clergy for its often misguided artistic demands in church commissions and praised the artist for his successful completion of a very arduous task. Since he had been required to represent both earthly and heavenly elements for this commission, the artist had, in effect, been asked to produce two different works in a single canvas: “Lecomte du Nouÿ has successfully translated the contrast between this good and noble man and the degraded beings who are elevated by the saint’s eloquence. The attitudes and the faces of these disheveled converts and the grand pose of the good man standing among them like a Christian Orpheus amongst the lions and tigers, all that forms an incredible ensemble for the contentment of eye and

161 Strahan 1878, p. 7.
162 See Introduction, p. 3 and note 2; for the French text see cat. 64.
163 On About, see Bouillon 1990.
spirit. But modern mysticism is not easily content. It insists that the Virgin, the angels, and the Eucharist are also present.” About did not believe that any artist would normally challenge himself this way, and praised Lecomte du Nouy’s solution to a difficult predicament. He admired how the mystical figures floated in a conventional light, while the human and dramatic portion was rendered in more earthy bluish tones. He saw the figures of the Virgin and the angels as representing a wonderful mixture of influences, including the Old Masters and Lecomte du Nouy’s personal tastes.164

René Delorme also focused on the work’s compositional division, but unlike About, he was far less impressed by the artist’s handling of light:

This grand composition is divided in two parts: one celestial, in which the Virgin, the Christ child, and the angels hover on clouds; the other terrestrial, where Vincent de Paul is seen preaching and converting those who have been punished for their crimes by human justice. In this second part there is a group of men treated with unusual vigor and a complete knowledge of anatomy. Saint Vincent de Paul is also skillfully rendered. But the pale sky, the light violet coloring of the angels, and the particular light of the clouds provide too great a contrast to the realistic scene taking place below.165

Charles Yriarte, writing in the Gazette des Beaux-Arts, also praised the altarpiece in his salon review and illustrated it with drawings of the work:

Mr. Lecomte du Nouy has executed a grand and very important composition for l'Église de la Sainte-Trinité. One can see in the two published images with what conscience the artist accomplished a task that might be considered a penumbra and a necessity of life. The whole lower area of the painting, the realistic part representing historic fact, Saint Vincent Bringing the Galley Slaves to the Faith, is well installed and deserves praise despite its neutral palette. The upper part is largely lacking in harmony and this is the area in which Lecomte du Nouy placed the Virgin and the celestial chorus in the manner of Ingres’s Vow of Louis XIII [1824, Montauban Cathedral] and most Renaissance artists; yet there is a certain boldness in the way he has cut off the painting’s supernatural part and emphasized it so vividly. There is much to praise in this work. This talented painter, as also evidenced by his Begging Homer [fig. 77], however, may not have sufficiently shaken off the influence of his three masters, Gleyre, Gérôme, and Signol.166

Another critic was far less forgiving in his Salon review, and disagreed completely with Delorme’s assessment of Lecomte du Nouy’s anatomical skills:

164 About, cited from Montgailhard 1906, p. 119-120; for the French text see cat. 111.
165 Delorme cited from Montgailhard 1906, p. 121; for the French text see cat. 111.
166 Yriarte 1876 (I), p. 718-20, repr. p. 721; for the French text see cat. 111.
Never has a painter embarrassed this critic so much as Mr. Lecomte du Nouy, whose real talent appeals to our sympathy, and whose works are always most disagreeable. What to say about *Saint Vincent de Paul Bringing the Galley Slaves to the Faith*? This painting reveals an enormous talent; it’s the work of a knowledgeable draftsman, an artist to be reckoned with. But the cult of his masters makes a clumsy pupil of Mr. Lecomte du Nouy. We fault him greatly for the canary-yellow halos around the head of the saint, and the host presented by the discreet angel behind him, as well as the upper part of the composition, which is a pale repetition of the *Virgin with the Host* [1851, Musée d’Orsay, Paris] by Ingres, who, like Gérôme, is admired by the artist. There are some beautiful areas in the group of the galley convicts, who seem so uncomfortable in their frame, so much so that the one in the foreground is obliged to fold his leg.\(^{167}\)

The 1879 Lorraine altarpiece was also first seen publicly at the salon. Jules Guillemot called it one of the exhibition’s best pictures in terms of arrangement and design. He remarked that that Vincent de Paul was known to have been a rather ugly man, and that the artist had managed to create such an “expression of evangelical goodness while keeping the resemblance” that the saint’s ugliness became unnoticeable.\(^{168}\) Modernist critics, however, saw no redeeming qualities whatsoever in this kind of painting. Joris Karel Huysmans, for example, attacked a painting by another artist before shifting his tirade against Lecomte du Nouy’s altarpiece:

All that is quite mediocre, but still, there is worse. It’s astonishing, but that’s the way it is. Mr. Lecomte du Nouy has accomplished this tour de force. I have always assumed that Mr. Lecomte du Nouy was perfectly capable of doing work other than painting. Did he miss his calling? Except for the fact that he has been making paintings for a long time, this would certainly have been clearly demonstrated by his *Saint Vincent de Paul*, brown like an old picture from the French school under Louis XIII. The only merit of this work is that no single fault curses louder than the others. Composition, design, color, everything is in keeping. It is aggravated Gérôme, it is painting by a prisoner.\(^{169}\)

*Romanian Frescoes* (after 1895)

After completing these altarpieces, the only large-scale religious works undertaken by Lecomte du Nouy were frescoes in Romanian churches. In 1895, during a visit to his brother, the architect André Lecomte du Nouy, in Romania he not only

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\(^{167}\) Anonymous 1876, p. 2; for the French text see cat. 111.

\(^{168}\) Guillemot, cited from Montgailhard 1906, p. 123; for the French text see cat. 139.

\(^{169}\) Huysmans 1883, p. 22; for the French text see cat. 139.
received portrait commissions from the royal family but was also asked to decorate churches, many of which were being restored by his brother. Montgailhard quotes the painter as saying: “The Romanian government has commissioned me to decorate several churches with frescoes, which I painted according to local custom in a Byzantine style, and in my compositions I added the portraits of sovereigns to the saints. I decorated the chapels and choirs of churches in Arges, Treiarchi, and Saint Nicholas of Lassi in this way.”

Lecomte du Nouy made many preparatory sketches and cartoons for these frescoes (cats. 260-263, 265, 266, 283, 284). For the year 1899, for example, Montgailhard lists works for the church in Lassy: “Carton pour Saint-Nicolas de Lassy (Roumanie). Quarante-deux figures: La mort de la Vierge [for which the Dahesh Museum of Art in New York owns a red chalk detail study of the Virgin’s face; fig. 120; cat. 247]; Les Princes fondateurs; Basile le Loup; Le Roi; La Reine; Les Princesses; La Patrie Roumaine; Tous les Saints; etc.”

Judith (1875)

Lecomte du Nouy successfully straddled the realms of the Bible and the Orient with the tender rendition of an ornately attired woman’s head in profile. He did not paint a traditional representation of a saint; indeed this Middle Eastern woman can only be identified as the apocryphal heroine Judith because her name is written in golden letters in the upper left corner of the small panel (fig. 121; cat. 106). Like Salomé, Judith was a biblical femme fatale, yet in this composition she holds neither a sword nor the decapitated head of Holofernes. Rather, the artist’s primary concern seems to be the careful depiction of the exotic costume and facial expression, and the work recalls Montgailhard’s account of Lecomte du Nouy’s trip to Morocco, where the highly

170 Montgailhard 1906, p. 73; several of the frescoes are reproduced in chapter IX.
171 1904 Salon catalogue: Les princes fondateurs et la famille royale – peinture murale, (Eglise Tré-iérachi à Jassy (Roumanie); La famille royale, La mort de la Vierge, Le Christ et les Saints – grande peinture murale (Eglise Saint Nicolas). 1905 Salon catalogue: S.M. le roi Charles ordonnant la reconstruction de l’église d’Argès, peinture murale. S.M. la reine Elisabeth offrant son Evangile à la Vierge – peinture murale (Eglise de Curtéa d’Arges, Roumanie). Several of these works are reproduced in Montgailhard 1906, chapter IX. See also the album with photos, BN: DC 309, vol. II, p. 74-77. The cartoons were probably later displayed in Paris, as similar titles appear in the salon catalogues of 1904 and 1905 under the category Monuments Publics (Public Monuments) where they are described as peinture murale (murals).
decorated costumes worn by the Jews made such an impression. Here, the *shatweh*, a headdress traditionally worn by married women from Bethlehem, is the most conspicuous detail. It is made of quilted and padded linen that is embroidered, and a bride-to-be would attach coins from her dowry in rows along the front. Montgailhard listed this painting as “*Judith (Tête). Appartenant à M. Fontenier*” (Judith (Head). Belonging to Mr. Fontenier; cat. 106), together with a work called “*Tasie (Tête)*” (Tasie (Head); cat. 107), owned by the same person. The subject of this latter picture is not clear and may represent an obscure figure from literature or mythology; regardless these two paintings of female heads seem to have functioned as pendants.

*Practicing Religion*

Apart from illustrating specific biblical scenes or figures, Lecomte du Nouy also depicted contemporary people practicing their faiths in a Middle Eastern environment. Such works can be considered religious genre paintings because they were intended for private collectors rather than for state or church commissions. Although existing churches in France were sometimes redecorated and new ones were still being built, the number of traditional religious commissions was limited and divided among a large number of artists. Just as the *néo-grecs* had transformed traditional history painting by introducing scenes of ancient everyday life, so religiously themed genre scenes represented a similar departure from traditional biblical iconography. Gérôme, for example, had set the tone for images of Muslims praying, particularly on Middle Eastern rooftops and in mosques, in works like his famous *The Prayer (in Cairo)* (fig. 122), as well as *The Public Prayer in a Mosque* (1871, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).  

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173 Ackerman 2000, p. 256-57, cat. no. 152, p. 274-75, cat. no. 200. See also cat. nos. 151 and 163, as well as various other similar paintings.
**At the Tomb of the Virgin, Jerusalem (Au tombeau de la Vierge, Jérusalem, 1871 and 1877)**

In 1878, Lecomte du Nouy made his own variations on the popular theme of people practicing their religions with *Prayer in a Mosque* (n.d.; possibly the painting reproduced in fig. 123; cat. 130) and *The Evening Prayer in Tangiers* (1879; cat. 141). On the other hand, *At the Tomb of the Virgin, Jerusalem* (1871; fig. 124; cat. 63), presents the more unusual subject of two Christian women in colorful dress praying before the Church of the Tomb of the Virgin Mary in Jerusalem. As in his later *Judith* (fig. 121), Lecomte du Nouy devoted great attention to the rendition of the women's distinctive garments. The arched doorway here closely resembles that of the church (the structure still exists today), suggesting that he either worked from a photograph of the building or that he had indeed visited Palestine.

In 1877, Lecomte du Nouy reworked this subject in a more ambitious manner in *Christian Women at the Tomb of the Virgin* (Les Chrétiennes au tombeau de la Vierge (Jérusalem), 1877; fig. 125; cat. 132). This version was exhibited at the Salon of 1878 and features a wider view of the neighboring Mount of Olives as well as more women praying. Only the kneeling woman directly in front of the (now open) door has, more or less, been retained from the earlier composition. Strahan wrote:

Lecomte Du Nouy takes us to the Holy Land with a large and highly finished composition of “Christian Women Entering the Chapel of the Virgin.” A Turkish sentinel, standing impassive[ly] at the portal, smokes a disrespectful pipe amid the ecstasy of these ardent Coptic and Albanian Christians, who kneel in the doorway or lean their heads in prayer against the external wall, fearing to enter until they have prayed away their sins and expiated their unworthiness. This picture is executed in palpable imitation of the style of Gérôme, but lacks that painter’s lucidity of arrangement and purity of expression.

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174 Rajab 1989. See for example plates 11, 12, 21, and 25 for similar garments.
175 For a photo of, and information about the Church of the Tomb of the Virgin Mary, see: Freeman-Greenville 1988, p. 43-44.
176 Aurillac 82.13.266, appendix I, is a preparatory sketch for the women holding a baby in her arms and the nude child lying before her.
177 Strahan 1880, II, p. 63.
According to the salon catalogue, a certain Mr. Pulley owned the picture; he may have commissioned it, as Privat wrote in December 1877: “At this moment he finishes the *Christian Women at the Tomb of the Virgin*, a painting that will leave for England.”\(^\text{178}\)

If he was not actually a dealer, Pulley did not keep the work for long, because Strahan featured it in his 1880 publication, *The Art Treasures of America*, while discussing the collection of Mr. Hercules L. Dousman of St. Louis. Eventually, it went into the collection of the devoutly Protestant collector Thomas Barlow Walker of Minneapolis. That Walker acquired such a work underscores the scholarly interest with which he and fellow believers approached the Middle East. Many American Protestants of this time saw the United States as the new Promised Land; countless American artists, scholars, and tourists traveled to Palestine, where they drew parallels with their homeland.\(^\text{179}\) Thus the American agents George Lucas and Samuel P. Avery acquired Lecomte du Nouy’s *A Woman from Bethlehem Praying on the Terrace of her House* (cat. 78), knowing the interest from American collectors for such pictures.\(^\text{180}\) Walker surely perceived *Christian Women at the Tomb of the Virgin* as an illustration of religious life in the land of the Bible, both historic and contemporary. In 1911, he began donating paintings to the Hennepin Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church in Minneapolis (now Hennepin Avenue Methodist Church), including this one. Ultimately, the church received from him thirty-two religious paintings intended to instill worshippers with Christian virtues and, in this case, teach them about the Middle Eastern origins of their faith.\(^\text{181}\)

*The Rabbis Commenting the Bible on Saturday (Morocco)* (Les rabbins commentant la Bible (Maroc), 1882)

At least one visit to Morocco provided Lecomte du Nouy with many motifs for his religious genre paintings, especially scenes depicting the Jewish community: *The Jewess of Tangiers* (Juive de Tanger, 1877; cat. 120), *The Evening Prayer in Tangiers* (La prière du soir à Tanger, 1879; cat. 141), *The Rabbis Commenting the Bible on* ...

\(^{178}\) Privat 1877, for the French text see appendix V.

\(^{179}\) Davis 1996.

\(^{180}\) See chapter I, note 83.

\(^{181}\) I would like to thank Janet L. Whitmore for providing me with the information regarding T. B. Walker, which she published in her dissertation, Whitmore 2002, p. 267-268.
Saturday (1882, fig. 126; cat. 172), Saturday in the Jewish Quarter, Morocco (Le Samedi au ghetto, Maroc, 1886; fig. 127; cat. 205). The First Star (Morocco) (La première étoile ou la fin du grand jeune, Maroc, 1894; fig. 128; cat. 248) is another example featuring Jews, and it also has an early American provenance, as Montgailhard listed it in a Boston collection. Schéfer’s critical assessment of the state of Orientalist painting by the 1880s is once more pertinent here, as he followed it with a brief discussion of The Rabbis
Commenting the Bible on Saturday:

The Orientalist pictures sent to this year’s salon are rather few. They all have, with few exceptions, something familiar. Algeria and Morocco have provided the strongest contingent of images of picturesque scenes. Mr. Lecomte du Nouy exhibits a Souvenir of Morocco: The Rabbis Commenting the Bible on Saturday, a carefully studied and precisely painted work, yet somewhat pale, that recalls in many ways the manner of Gérôme. The types of the rabbis, of a large variety of expression, point towards an attentive study; one recognizes in this genre painting the firm composition and design that derive from a vigorous artistic training.182

The familiar artistic pros and cons about this kind of art resurface here, but the depiction of Jewish people is significant here. Jewish people appear regularly in nineteenth-century Orientalist pictures, as they generally did not mind being portrayed by artists, whereas Muslims often objected to posing on religious grounds. This may explain why Lecomte de Nouy made several sketches in the Jewish ghetto of Tangiers, though he may also have been interested in Jewish culture because his first wife was Jewish.183

The Marabout Prophet Sidna-Aïssa (Le marabout prophète Sidna-Aïssa, 1883)

Another of the artist’s fascinating religious genre scenes is The Marabout Prophet Sidna-Aïssa (fig. 129; cat. 180). A marabout is a Muslim hermit, saint, and mystic, and Sidi Mohammed Ben Aïssa (also known as al-Cheikh al-kamel, which means “the perfect one”) founded the Sufi brotherhood of the Aïssawa and was buried in 1526 in Meknès (Morocco). He traveled around the country preaching and gained a reputation for miraculously immunizing his followers from wounds and disease; during epidemics their

182 Schéfer 1882, p. 177-78; for the French text see cat. 172.
183 See also the discussion around Lecomte du Nouy’s portrait of Adolphe Crémieux, chapter 1, fig. 47.
presence was often requested to dispel disease through ritual dances. The prophet wielded great political influence and called for a holy war against Portuguese and Spanish Christians.¹⁸⁴

Montgailhard described the painting’s inception as follows: “Every day at the Arab market [Lecomte du Nouy] passed a santon seated at the gate of a mosque. Venerated by his followers in a very special way, his bed was never empty as one was honored to have a woman who had approached Sidna Aîssa, the saint of the mosque with the green ceramic decoration. Seeing Lecomte du Nouy, however, clearly brought him no pleasure whatsoever, because every time he saw this foreigner, the holy man cursed abundantly at him. This did not affect our painter, and he was satisfied to note in passing the smallest details of the accessories and the barbaric physiognomy of this fanatic. And that permitted him to compose his painting The Marabout Prophet Sidna-Aissa.”¹⁸⁵ Thus Lecomte du Nouy based his depiction of a sixteenth-century personage on his own contemporary experience abroad; he rendered the saint and his followers in a great variety of poses and expressions, paying careful attention to details of architecture and costume, including the Arabic script on the wall above the saint’s head, which reads: “May God give you health. May God give you strength.”

¹⁸⁴ See the entry on this painting in the auction catalogue Important Orientalist Paintings from a Private European Collection (Christie’s, New York, October 31, 2001), p. 38, lot 7.
¹⁸⁵ Montgailhard 1906, p. 50.
In 1906, Montgailhard concluded his biography of Lecomte du Nouy with two chapters in which he attempted to characterize the artist’s work and life. The first of these chapters explains why the author wrote such a book at a time when many perceived Lecomte du Nouy’s art as outmoded. Montgailhard challenged that view by celebrating the oeuvre of an artist who, he felt, was sincere, conveyed profound ideas, and was always reinventing himself. He believed that Lecomte du Nouy should be distinguished from his many colleagues who merely adhered to a school or attitude and produced pictures that reflected no deeper convictions. With such generic titles as *Bather*, *Dreaming*, or *Twilight*, the works of such artists represented only meaningless brushstrokes. They were not driven by any profound motivation, and Montgailhard grumbled that “a cold rage overtakes the critic who is condemned to contemplate the one thousandth nude, the fifteen hundredth bathing scene, or the ten thousandth picture that is no more than an advertisement for a fashionable couturier.” Lecomte du Nouy, on the other hand, was, he felt, one of the last classical painters, together with Luc Olivier Merson and Jules Lefebvre, to produce truly powerful works. Like them he showed a noble enthusiasm and transmitted the great writers and cultural achievements of the world: Victor Hugo, Homer, Théophile Gautier, Antiquity, and the Orient, had inspired his greatest pictures. He sought archeological correctness in his historical scenes and strove to represent each person in an appropriate manner.

Montgailhard’s characterized in glowing terms the artistic merits of an artist who is today all but forgotten. Indeed, on the basis of the aesthetic criteria of our own time, Lecomte du Nouy would typically be viewed as precisely one of those artists who produced nothing but “meaningless brushstrokes.” The writer’s arguments shed a different light on this artist’s long-neglected oeuvre, suggesting that both the painter and his biographer never ceased to adhere to a concept of art that was rooted in academic classicism and that above all, they valued morally uplifting narratives executed with formal skill.

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186 Chapter XII: *L’ensemble de l’oeuvre* (The work as a whole), and Chapter XIII: *L’artiste et l’homme* (The artist and the man).
187 Montgailhard 1906, chapter 12.
Lecomte du Nouy chose a traditional mode of expression and consequently positioned himself on the losing side in the battle for so-called artistic progress, as many avant-garde critics of the time saw their cause. Regardless of whether one supports this position or not, it should be acknowledged that artists like Lecomte du Nouy made their choice consciously. His encounter with Manet in Venice in 1875, for example, is emblematic of their contrasting points of view. Lecomte du Nouy saw the city of Venice as the embodiment of beauty, and he tirelessly depicted its countless charms. So when he met Manet there and saw that his colleague’s representation of Venice consisted of a canvas showing only the sea, the sky, and three posts sticking out of the water, he asked in despair: “Why come this far, why live so long amidst this city of dreams, to find only this?”188 Certainly, Lecomte du Nouy also painted charming little oil sketches there, studying picturesque details and casual street scenes. But these works were primarily intended as practical exercises and later, in his studio, they served to revive his memory. When Venice was the subject of one of his salon paintings, however, it would typically include palazzi, churches, and gondolas, and the scene might even be set in the past. It evidently did not enter Lecomte de Nouy’s mind that something as seemingly banal as a sun-drenched water surface might count as a legitimate subject for a work of art; what significant message could it possibly communicate?

Other themes that modernist painters used to explore new artistic avenues were also anathema to Lecomte du Nouy. He saw no valid reason to depict scenes of modern life on the Parisian boulevards, and to him railway stations and factory smokestacks hardly represented awe-inspiring symbols of progress. On the contrary, they signified society’s loss of ideals and traditional values. Some personal scribbles next to a sketch for one of his late pictures clearly express such convictions: “Beauty is dead, industry has triumphed, courage and personal heroism have been sacrificed on the brutal altar of the machine.”189 Even the terminology “sacrifice” and “altar” employed within such a cursory phrase betrays Lecomte du Nouy’s ingrained preference for classical convention.

188 Montgailhard 1906, p. 46-47. For a similar anecdote on a painting by Lecomte du Nouy of a buoy (cats. 93, 94), see Privat 1877, appendix V.
189 Aurillac: 82.13.115, see appendix I.
Another of these sketches shows Poetry and Art fleeing before Industry, accompanied by the comment "farewell to the charms of dreams of spirit and soul."  

Lecomte du Nouy was undoubtedly a conservative man, but this conservatism seems to have sprung from an almost endearing naiveté. The artist obviously dreamt of an ideal world and often painted one that went beyond conventional modes of representation. His depictions of apparitions and supernatural beings reflect a great imagination. This more or less symbolist element within his œuvre links it to the broader characteristics of late nineteenth-century art. Although Lecomte du Nouy’s Neoclassical and Orientalist traits are too dominant for him to be associated with more typical symbolists like Odilon Redon (1840-1916) or Puvis de Chavannes (1824-98), his predilection for chimerical imagery can be related to symbolist tendencies in French art of his time. In addition to the drug-induced hallucinations Lecomte du Nouy depicted in several of his Orientalist scenes, images of angels and other apparitions of human forms served as an alternative to a more traditional idealization and allegorical representation in a strictly Neoclassical sense. Another explanation for his fondness for representing otherworldly creatures might be related to the personal loss he had suffered through the premature deaths of his first two wives. Such profound and life-changing experiences might have incited a desire for spiritual solace.

Lecomte du Nouy’s political point of view also reveals his conservative, if not reactionary, personality. As a young man he voluntarily participated in the Franco-Prussian War, and he lived long enough to experience World War I. These devastating historic events must certainly have shaped his nationalistic and patriotic feelings, which he expressed most concretely through various Napoleonic and other military images, both in painting and sculpture. The traditional French animosity towards the Germans, for example, was strongly reanimated after France’s loss in the 1871 conflict, and it must have influenced Lecomte du Nouy’s apparent desire for a powerful French leader, a concept he projected onto the historical figure of Napoleon.

A sense of the artist’s political conservatism is further confirmed by our knowledge of his brush with royalty. When visiting his brother in Romania in 1895, the artist received several important commissions from that country’s royal family. These

\[190\] Aurillac: 82.13.184, see appendix I.
ranged from official state portraits and murals in local churches to sculptural monuments. The artist was thus provided with exactly the kind of commissions and recognition he had dreamed of for so long. It is true that these commissions were significant, certainly by Romanian standards, and they allowed the artist to work on a grand scale, both in a literal and figurative sense. But Romania was not France, and being successful in this peripheral country did not translate into similar recognition at home, which is ultimately what counted for him. Even though he traveled widely, France was the center of the artist's world, an idea most poignantly expressed in the informal drawing he made of God's hand holding the globe, on which only Rome, Paris, and France are clearly marked. 191

Still, it seems that Lecomte du Nouy's strong traditionalism did not preclude a sense of humor. A charming, undated little oil sketch, inscribed "Sarah-Bernhardt et Clairin planant au dessus des hommes" (Sarah Bernhardt and Clairin gliding over the people; fig. 130), depicts the famous actress and her painter friend flying a hot air balloon. 192 And during a visit to Amsterdam, he drew on two facing pages of his sketchbook a row of five portly washerwomen dressed in long skirts, each bending forward while concentrating on her task. The sight of five formidable behinds, encountered during an early morning exploration of the city, had stopped the artist in his track. 193 But Lecomte de Nouy's most obvious attempt to make an intentionally humorous work of art is a drawing that bears the inscription "FLIRT" in capital letters. It shows a fashionably dressed young lady walking her dog on a leash. This dog in turn, closely follows and smells a smaller dog with apparent interest.

Ultimately, however, Lecomte du Nouy did not approach his art lightly, and he aspired to be remembered as a serious painter. Whenever possible, he created large-scale works in which he could express his profound ambitions. But against the changing social and political background of a devastating world war, as well a growing artistic mentality that cherished innovation and leaned toward abstraction, the concept of traditional history painting could no longer hold on to its former supremacy. During the 1880s, the French government stopped dictating most artistic matters and ceded control of the salon

191 Aurillac: 82.13.34, see appendix I.
192 Aurillac: 82.13.316, see appendix I. Sarah Bernhardt describes this experience in her memoirs, Bernhardt 1907, p. 283-87.
193 Aurillac: 82.13.352, p. 13, see appendix I. The drawing bears the annotation "Amsterdam 8h du matin (Souvenir)," but it is not evident when this trip occurred.
exhibitions to the artists themselves. In the meantime, artists began to operate in an art market dominated by commercial galleries and predominantly middle- and upper-class patronage. As a result, there was room for a much greater variety of artistic expression. The traditional artists as well as the avant-gardists could operate in parallel worlds.

It should be acknowledged, however, that traditionalists like Lecomte du Nouy also reacted to these changing circumstances in their own ways. Néo-grec and Orientalist painting already represented a departure from established history painting. Admittedly, these changes did not go much beyond the parameters of the academic canon, and they were insufficient for more independent artists who wanted to depart even further, if not completely, from these principles. But it is nonetheless clear that these changes affected the more conventional artists to some degree.

Lecomte du Nouy’s career strongly resembles that of Gérôme, with an early focus on néo-grec painting that shifted toward a preference for Orientalist subjects. In addition to Lecomte du Nouy’s incessant attempts to realize monumental paintings and sculptures, the majority of his oeuvre, like that of his teacher, also consisted of exotic easel pictures that were intended for private collectors. In fact, the main difference between the two artists was that Gérôme never really worked on a truly grand scale, with the exception of a few sculptures. Even if Lecomte du Nouy cherished higher aspirations, he is currently most recognized as an Orientalist painter, a reputation defined by such works as The Dream of a Eunuch (fig. 87) and The White Slave (fig. 105). Even during his lifetime the artist achieved his widest recognition with a composition set in ancient Egypt, The Bearers of Bad Tidings (fig. 82).

The Western European taste for exoticism flourished in the nineteenth century, and the modern scholarly debate on this subject has turned into a distinct phenomenon itself. The term Orientalism originally referred quite neutrally to the study by Western scholars of Eastern cultures in the broadest sense, with a focus on religion, customs, language, literature, and the arts. Within the discipline of art-history, the term usually refers to the depiction by Western European artists of non-Western, usually Middle and Far Eastern subjects. Since 1978, with the appearance of Edward Said’s groundbreaking book Orientalism, no modern study of the subject can avoid reference to his theories,
which were primarily concerned with literary criticism rather than the visual arts.\textsuperscript{194} Said’s idea that the concept of Orientalism was an imperialistic tool used to further Western European dominance and to reinforce its colonial power, was first systematically transposed to art history by Linda Nochlin in her 1983 review of an exhibition about nineteenth-century French Orientalist painting.\textsuperscript{195} In the meantime, the discussion on this subject has far from subsided and several refinements to Said’s arguments have already been offered.\textsuperscript{196}

In her article, Nochlin applied Said’s view to the genre of Orientalist painting, arguing that many of these images sustained negative stereotypes about Islamic cultures, such as corruption (expressed through ruined buildings that are supposed to be emblematic of decay and neglect), idleness (men and women sitting around lazily), violence (gruesome images of barbaric behavior), and, last but not least, two related concepts of power (man’s sexual power over women, as well as the white man’s domination over “inferior” darker races). Such stereotypes were undeniably prevalent in Western European culture of the nineteenth century and a painter like Lecomte du Nouy was very much a product of this culture. Indeed, in this book I have made somewhat similar observations, in particular in relation to the artist’s Orientalist pictures like \textit{The White Slave}, \textit{The Orientals}, \textit{The Dream of a Eunuch}, and \textit{The Bearers of Bad Tidings}.

This Saidian approach, however, should not be the only lens through which to look at Orientalist art in general, or at Lecomte du Nouy’s in particular. Certainly, the artist was a Catholic, nationalistic, and conservative man, and perhaps even a womanizer, but he was also someone with a true artistic drive and sensibility. Artists like Lecomte du Nouy, or Gérôme, were not principally motivated to depict Orientalist subjects as an artistic means of political suppression. Their work may have confirmed, and even furthered, certain stereotypes, but these artists’ sincere fascination with, and admiration for the exotic subject they portrayed must have been a far greater force. The hardships of travel, the risks of disease and other hazards that could occur during their long sojourns

\textsuperscript{194} Said 1978.
\textsuperscript{195} Nochlin 1983, p. 118-189; the exhibition and its catalogue reviewed is \textit{Orientalism} 1982.
\textsuperscript{196} For this discussion see MacKenzie 1995, and for a more recent study on a particular facet of Orientalism that also provides amendments to Said, see Benjamin 2003, and its review, Bohrer 2004, p. 176-180.
abroad were too great for such negative approach to be the main point of departure for their artistic pursuit.

The stereotypes for which nineteenth-century Orientalist painting has often been faulted existed, but they should be placed in context and also be recognized in a far greater range of artistic categories. Artists have always constructed images of many kinds, and constructed remains the operative word, especially academically trained artists who were taught to select from nature the most significant characteristics available so as to create a convincing and intelligible image. Moreover, no matter how realistic representations of far away places appeared, or how much historical research underlay these compositions, both painter and spectator were generally well aware that these images ultimately represented only a relative truth. In Lecomte du Nouy’s work this argument is well illustrated by the genesis of The Gate of the Harem (fig. 101).

One could draw a parallel between Orientalist painting and the prolific genre of Italian peasant imagery. When French nineteenth-century artists traveled in great numbers to Italy, they were usually first lured by the desire to discover the classical past and study its remnants. Once there, the new environment provided also many unexpected charms in terms of unfamiliar landscapes and the local population that often looked so different. As a result, there exist countless Italian peasant and brigand scenes by French artists that stem primarily from a curiosity about the unknown and “exotic.” The French also had an overt political interest in Italy, and great parts of the peninsula were under Napoleonic rule for many years. Few would argue, however, that these peasant scenes served as a tool to exert French cultural dominance over Italy. Nonetheless, these images certainly could be characterized as a stereotypical representation of another people, dealing with issues of another civilization, class and, if not race, at least skin color. For a painter from Paris, a Neapolitan peasant could appear as foreign or exotic as a Moroccan pottery merchant. Rather than contempt, feelings of curiosity and admiration inspired most of these depictions. Once the road to Naples had been traveled too often, the greater artistic challenge lay in the exploration of North Africa and the Middle East. Similar to Italian peasant scenes, most Orientalist Salon paintings were created primarily out of an artist’s personal desire and excitement rather than an expression of disdain, and at the same time the works catered to great demand from a collecting audience.
It is true that most harem scenes generally depict the female nude as an easily available object for the male spectator, either the painter himself, the Salon visitor, or the collector of such works. Yet, the harem scene is ultimately not more than a variation on the theme of the classical or Biblical nude. Gérôme’s early néo-grec painting of a bathhouse, *Le Gynécée* (1850, Private collection) hardly differs in concept from his later Orientalist *Moorish Bath* (1872, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).\(^{197}\) The voyeurism that clearly underlies these works does not differ greatly from that of an original Roman fresco with a similar subject, or a 17\(^{th}\)-century depiction of a bathing Bathsheba. Moreover, works by modernists such as Courbet and Gauguin, who are generally championed by contemporary critics, Nochlin included, as the providers of relief from the stuffy academic painter’s attitude, contain endless references that could be used to single out an approach that reflects the idea of male domination, if not sexual obsession. Courbet’s *Woman with a Parrot* (1866, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), let alone *The Origin of the World* (1866, Musée d’Orsay, Paris), or Gauguin’s countless depictions of Haitian beauties, ultimately reveal no true distinction from that of Orientalist harem scenes, other than stylistic ones.

Nochlin argued that Orientalism “can be viewed under the aegis of the more general category of the picturesque, a category that can encompass a wide variety of visual objects and ideological strategies,” such as regional genre painting.\(^ {198}\) She compared Gérôme’s North African Islamic processions to the Catholic pardons in Brittany by artists like Jules Breton and Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret, claiming that both “represent backward, oppressed peoples sticking to traditional practices.” To Nochlin, the alternative to the picturesque quality of these works was provided by Courbet in his *Burial at Ornans* (1850, Musée d’Orsay, Paris) and Gauguin, in his *Day of the God* (1894, The Art Institute of Chicago). Courbet, it is argued, avoided the picturesque by including his own friends and family as the “natives,” and thus truly identified with the people represented. And Gauguin’s use of compositional flatness and decorative simplification is supposed to have brought his art closer to his “primitive” subject. Since Nochlin’s article appeared, however, it has become clear that a painter like Dagnan-

\(^{197}\) Ackerman 2000, cat. no. 29 and 197.
\(^{198}\) Nochlin 1983, p. 127.
Bouveret most certainly did not look down upon the religious and rural traditions of the region from which he originated, and to which he continually returned. On the contrary, he, too, used family members who posed for his paintings, and he deeply respected the customs he commemorated on canvas.\textsuperscript{199}

Orientalist religious genre scenes by Lecomte du Nouy must also have originated from a sincere curiosity about different customs and beliefs, rather than being the weapons in an artistic crusade. The artist remained a practicing Catholic all his life, and he could now easily be molded into the representative of a Western aggressor creating images that celebrated his own cultural superiority over the barbaric Islamic world. Such an approach has indeed been taken in writings about \textit{The Bearers of Bad Tidings}, and similar issues of despotistic violence are evidently incorporated in his eunuch paintings. But some nuances are nonetheless worth noting. Nineteenth-century France, for example, experienced a great deal of anti-Semitic sentiment within its own borders, and Lecomte du Nouy could have easily shared them. He did, however, marry a Jewish woman and repeatedly painted images of Jews that were inspired by his travels in the Middle East. No matter how this biographical fact should be interpreted, it does at least reveal a certain open-mindedness in an otherwise distinctly conservative personality.

Moreover, an artist cannot always be held responsible for the way his work is interpreted by others. In particular, Lecomte du Nouy’s \textit{The Bearers of Bad Tidings} has been a convenient vehicle for certain critics to share their brazen views of the inferior “other,” both in terms of a barbaric non-Western civilization and the supremacy of Christianity. Lecomte du Nouy indeed pulled out all his artistic stops to create an outrageous image intended to attract the attention of the visitors to the Salon. As an up-and-coming artist, he seems to have been far more concerned with establishing his own reputation than with waging a cultural war, though certain later critics employed the image for just this purpose. Similarly, but on a different level, the strong impact this painting had on the young Julian Green’s homosexual awakening was surely not intended when a decidedly heterosexual artist as Lecomte du Nouy composed his picture.

Ultimately, I second Nochlin in her conclusion that: “Works like Gérôme’s, and that of other Orientalists of his ilk [such as Lecomte du Nouy], are valuable and well

\textsuperscript{199} Weisberg 2002.
worth investigating not because they share the esthetic values of great art on a slightly lower level, but because as visual imagery they anticipate and predict the qualities of incipient mass culture. [...] As a fresh visual territory to be investigated by scholars armed with historical and political awareness and analytic sophistication, Orientalism – or rather its deconstruction – offers a challenge to art historians, as do many other similarly obfuscated areas of our [art historical] discipline.²¹⁰ Indeed, the similarly obfuscated areas would be the broader category of academic art, which deserves equal scrutiny and an open-minded approach by art historians, especially those using modernist criteria as the only valuable approach to works created in the nineteenth century.

Ultimately, it is not productive merely to situate artists within the opposing camps of academicism versus the avant-garde. These apparently opposing camps, consisted in reality of a great array of individuals who represented a range of artistic personalities, ideas, and attitudes. Twenty-first century viewers who reject the work of an artist like Lecomte du Nouÿ due to its unfashionable academicism fail to appreciate the rich and diverse nature of late-nineteenth century culture.