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The human figure as method : study, sculpture and sculptors in the Academie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture (1725-1765)

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Summary

For a century and a half the Paris *Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture* (1648–1793) was the paramount influence in French painting and sculpture. Until now, the survey on academic sculpture has lagged behind with regard to academic painting. This dissertation is a contribution to repair this imbalance. It describes a trajectory of training for sculptors, inventories criteria for the selection and nomination of new members and analyzes work that played a part in these processes.

For the French Academy, a distinction can be made between artistic education in a narrow sense —the training of draughtsmen— and the artist's study as an integral part of artistic practice. Rather than starting with the artistic education —as is usually the case—, I have decided to begin by looking at the artist's study. By taking one's point of departure in the productive workshop, one can observe the *Académie* heeding a complex of techniques from the workshops of painters and sculptors in order to re-contextualize and adapt them in artistic instruction. Discussing the comprehensive idea of artistic preparation, one can evince that techniques which normally make up a practitioner's repertory of skills are given new meaning, as a means of transforming a capable sculptor into an artist. Finally, by assuming the perspective of a cultural historian, one can focus on how *Académie* would wield a notion of academic life and productivity embraced in educated circles and then tried to implement it in the practices of painters and sculptors. One can understand that to succeed, the Academy had to develop a training style and a method of evaluation of its own.

The concentration on artist's studies instead of artistic education demands that traditional methods for conducting research on the Paris Academy be adapted, and to this end the dissertation examines three central themes: the diverse types of work made by sculptors in the trajectory of instruction and nomination, the history of relations between French sculptors and the royal Academies, and the contemporary imagination of sculptors and sculptures. With this composite agenda I have attempted to develop an approach that understands the *Académie* as a part and parcel of a civilizing program with its own system of values.

Approach

The period under survey covers four decades, approximately between 1725 and 1765. In order to enter the *Académie* in this period sculptors fashioned a piece of admission or *morceau de réception*, a freestanding, marble figure, the subject of which was imposed or had to be approved by the Academy Director. The idea of demanding free-standing figures had no precedents among European Academies and remained unique to Paris for long. Scholars have done little to study the marble figures that sculptors submitted to the *Académie* and which have been preserved in substantial quantities.

In the decades between 1725 and 1765 sculpture became increasingly commodified. After having prevailed during the reign of Louis XIV, monumental sculpture was sidelined by genres such as the portrait bust or the small-scale and decorative work. The origins of this crisis were predominantly financial, but the its effect on attitudes to sculpture were profound. As the opportunities for designing public and representative monuments waned, it became more difficult for sculptors to maintain a proper line of distinction between sculpture made within the market and that produced under the auspices of the king. However, several sculptors found clever ways to salvage for themselves an aura of higher vocation. They concentrated themselves on extraordinary (foreign) assignments, made work that inspired learned commentary or conducted a writer's career. Their professional approach proved to be susceptible to a sting of associations with to

more properly intellectual occupations. As if to counteract the dissolution of proper boundaries between the market and the noble sphere of commissions, sculptors used their time to acquire the renown of *grands hommes*.

Elsewhere, it has been shown that the vocabulary used in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries borrowed many terms from disciplines such as literary criticism and medical science. Between 1725 and 1765, the perception of sculpture continued to depend on other educated activities in eighteenth-century Paris' rich visual culture. The causes for the success of this multidisciplinary system of terms lies in France in the academic movement, which originated in the seventeenth century and which became the stage of an encounter between on the one hand a humanistic model of literary education and on the other hand a rather traditional form of professional organization: that of the guilds. All of this influenced the way that artistic life was integrated in academic thinking. It can be shown that the exchange between discrete occupations not only guaranteed continuity in the use of terms, but also affected ideas on academic life and work that accompanied these notions.

The importance of an analysis of training and nomination practices as two interweaved institutions follows from what has been said. Instead of asking, for instance, how the organization of French drawing instruction affected the formal appearance of French sculpture, I have preferred to describe the *Académie's* ambition to transmit a model of behavior and work, a *habitus*. Nor do I believe it would have been useful to gauge workshop practices in their exact material organization — an approach that can narrow out the scope of investigation, allowing only for questions about the material production of works to be posed. Instead, I have opted to show how artistic life is cultivated in or from Paris, and how academic schools and the *morceaux de réception* functioned as the stage for a civilizing project.

Study

The question I have set out to answer in this dissertation, is how the occupation of 'sculpting' and the person of 'the sculptor' assumed their respective

meanings in the Academy circles. The question of the role played in this process by diverse study activities has been subdivided into the two axes, corresponding to the two parts composing the thesis. In Part I my concern is with the academic trajectory, whereas in Part II I examine specific works of sculpture. The historical narrative in Part I shows how an academic system of values determines practices; Part II discusses a selection of works, focusing on the measure in which academic values were realized in these works.

As I pointed out earlier, the binding element is constituted by the notion of *étude*. In art history it is customary to convert drawings, sketches and models into evidence of a process of making — to show how these works by necessity play a role in the fashioning of a work. Gradually, art historians have come to recognize that this exclusive comparing of the preliminary with the finished obfuscates the social function of designs, or the way in which looking at works such as sketches is regulated by cultural conventions. A similar objection — lack of cultural and socio-historical hindsight — can be made against the methods developed within the discipline of art history in order to explain formal similarities between artworks. I have developed my method with regard to the French eighteenth-century *étude* with the help of these pillars of criticism, and as an answer to the popularity of ‘imitation’ and ‘emulation’ in surveys of academic art. To this end I have detached the exercises of artists from the practical context, so that they can once again assume their place in an ideal of academic education. I have not intended, however, to lose sight of workshop practices, but rather to show them as active components in a socially significant, normative set of attitudes. The academic model in the eighteenth century, as several of the dissertation’s findings suggest, is characterized by constant attempts to rein in the tendencies of market responsiveness and collaboration. Learning is above all the flip side of a contempt for cost-efficient production.

With greater attention to study exercises in their mutual relations I want to involve the material usually relegated to preparative stages of artistic production in a new reading of artistic developments in the eighteenth century. Familiar labels of art historical periodization — baroque and neo-classicism, naturalism and idealism — must be abandoned in favor of a

cultural historian's model of interpretation. Subsequently, examination of art theory can show ways in which the *Académie* acted as an intermediary between the artisan understanding of the sculptor's workshop and an academic ideal of personal development: that of the *artiste* as a man of intellect who is capable of developing his knowledge through manual work and instruments. This comparative approach, uniting works and ideas, reveals a behavioral pattern, a *habitus*, rather than a normative repertory of forms, let alone a fully developed aesthetics. A chain of guidelines and opportunities illustrates how between 1725 and 1765 the *Académie* became absorbed by the challenge of situating discrete works in its ideal of practice, so that it was indeed barred from accepting ready-made autonomous systems of evaluation that would have applied exclusively to painting and sculpture. With a view to this interdependency between analytical language, working procedures and cultivation, I have wielded terms that were also meaningful in other areas of knowledge: *mouvement*, *contraste*, *repos*.

The Academic Sculptors

Part I is an account of the training and accreditation that permitted sculptors to become members of the *Académie*. Chapter 2 is devoted to the *Académie de France* in Rome, where artists arrived to conduct their studies after having successfully completed the basic training for drawing after life in the Paris *école du modèle*. This is followed by a more conceptual chapter, after which Chapters 4 and 5 continue to track sculptors as they present themselves in Paris with a piece of admission or *morceau de réception* in order to be nominated.

The Roman study journey was more than a continuation of the Parisian drawing school. With an inspired Director in the painter N. Vleughels (1724–1737) between 1724 and 1737, this southern *dépendance* of the *Académie royale* evolved into a microcosm of academic artishood. The program of labors was not left to chance, and was an overture to all artistic activity. **Chapter 2** describes this regime of exercise. Not only does it touch on the marked contrast between regular drawing instruction and the Ro-

man study journey, but also the extent in which the Roman training was regarded as an safe haven for the artisan constrictions of the workshop environment. The evidence for this rejection of workshop training can be found scattered in personal correspondence and academic lectures, as well as the work that was made by students in Rome.

Writers such as Vleughels, but also Comte de Caylus (1692–1765), C. N. Cochin (1715–1790) and J. Reynolds (1723–1792) were in favor of allowing students to follow their own preferences in their choice of works and techniques. A similar view was being adopted at the moment in literary education in French colleges. A fixed route along specific works would have little didactic effect and hamper the development of young artists. Such an approach, it was deemed, would bear too clear a resemblance to the inexorability of stylistic instruction in workshops, or relegate students to the constricting outlook of their national schools. Rome became a panacea for the lack of dependence and servility to a local market, offering freedom to meditate and acquire insightful knowledge about modalities of painting and sculpture, a process in which the *master* —both in the sense of instructor and canonic example— was replaced by the impartial guide or *guide éclairé*. The artist envisaged by the *Académie* had to move in the company of noble persons and display a ‘learned ease’ in drawing and modeling. Such painters and sculptors had to be masters of adaptability, capable of recollecting effortlessly an ample formal reservoir of predominantly human figures, without any kind of recourse to a workshop.

Chapter 3, on the notion of the Academic sculptor, looks to solve the question of why independence, personal development and figure design were held in such high regard. As previous chapter showed, Academic writers were dismissive of the commercial workshop. The desire to ennoble practice was nowhere as conspicuous as in the layered use of the term *étude*. For French painters and sculptors this term covered two different meanings: it was the name of a specific type of works, and it could refer for a procedure that distinguished the academic artist. When the sculptor E.-M. Falconet (1716–1791) delivered in 1760 a ground-breaking academic lecture on sculpture, *étude* assumed a place of honor in his definition of the art. In keeping with inherited ideas on *disegno*, Falconet saw a direct

link between exercise and artistic performance. The incessant study of objects that the sculptor imitates, the human body the greatest among them, would allow for a complex of mental faculties to enter into a unique form of cooperation.

'Study' embedded a painting or a sculpture in an individual with an intention. To elucidate this, I discussed a theory of artistic psychology from a lecture that must have been familiar to Falconet. The author, C.-H. Watelet (1718–1786), shows that the capacity for imitation is only an outer manifestation —and not a very special one, if taken by isolation— of fundamental inclinations that prompt painters to work. Falconet reinforced this view in a modest thought experiment, asking what the first painting or sculpture made by a genius must have been like. He proposed that this first work of visual art must have been the image of a human being. But unlike more primitive body images, and in contrast to able craftsmen who manage to arrive at faithful representations of the body, this first painter or sculptor of genius must have given his figure the impression of being alive. Its shapes would have reverberated with formal characteristics that spoke to certain contents, referred to by Falconet as *des effets* and *des situations*. The artist's figure design is thus concerned with giving correct views of the body only in an ulterior check of the work: what is achieved by genius is this 'speaking' or 'lively' figural presentation.

Contemporary developments in French and English theater suggest that the notion of study in the visual arts underwent a shift in meaning with the passage from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. In English acting companies this took place in a rather overt manner —exercise with instructors (for instance specialists in *enunciatio* were increasingly complemented with rehearsal, and instead of simply designing delivery and action on the basis of the text, actors liked to address specific scenes or characters for their own sake. In this estimation of the effect of theatrical performance, the beholder's response was paramount. The transition from a textual focus on instruction to a visual focus on study is present in sixteenth-century theories of painting, but in the eighteenth-century Parisian Academy it took as specific shape. Painters and sculptors had to view their figures in terms of a pictorial or sculptural unity the perfection of which was the goal of a

chain of studios operations.

In the Parisian Academy artistic capacity was seen to depend less heavily on collecting information with other areas of knowledge than on a comprehensive act of figure study. This reduces the question of how a specific subject should be represented, inasmuch as it depends on consulting texts, to a subordinate concern. Inversely, the development of a typology of figures was viewed with renewed interest. An illustration of this is provided by a lecture by M.-F. Dandré-Bardon (1700–1783) on the posing of the nude model. What Dandré-Bardon proposed to do was simple enough: young artists would achieve better results in their studies from the life if they were capable of differentiating more adequately between different kinds of poses. He recommended subdividing poses into three types, each defined in terms of basic situations a body can find itself in —*repos*, *action*, *contraste*— and in direct relation to this the effect of the figure as a part of a painting or sculpture. Dandré-Bardon leaves little doubt that a given body image is susceptible for artistic treatment only under specific conditions. Because anatomical and literary aids were actually redundant to this estimation of the effect of figures, drawing and modeling were all the more necessary. Within these activities the *Académie* made a distinction between two forms: the *académie* and the *étude*. The first was a drawing, fashioned for its own sake in accordance with good norms of able draughtsmanship; the latter went straight to the core of studying, because in it a figure in its sometimes economic notation was endowed with the determined and intentional manner of work of the artist, full of an infectious *feu en imagination*.

Writings by members of the *Académie* are not the only body of evidence for the pre-eminence of qualities that were seen to attach to drawn or modeled *études*. Another source can be found in the policies of encouragement and inspection that permitted sculptors to become members of the Parisian society. One could venture to state that the development that sculptors' nominations can be seen to undergo after ca. 1700 are difficult to explain other than by pointing to the intensified attention to studios operations in sculptors' practices. Not until after 1700 did a veritable test for academic sculptors introduced. Until the suppression of the Academy in 1793, almost

every sculptor nominated complied with it. In **Chapters 4 and 5** Academic sculptors' nominations are discussed.

The freestanding, marble figure required a specific mode of evaluation. Although the extant documents offer insufficient support for the view that pieces had to satisfy a series of rigid guidelines, sources varying from rules and regulations to rare, written commentaries provide some indications as to how the pieces were evaluated. The *morceau de réception* represented a demonstration of academic industry. In the course of academic meetings a series of viewings were organized, concerning first models and finally the finished marble. The quality of individual works is determined on two points: the design and the material finish, also referred to as *figure* and *exécution*. The successive viewings of models gave rise to a strictly rational weighing out of furnishings of a subject and figure-finding.

In the early stage of nominations, inspection visits by members of the Academy constituted a continuation of the guidance young artists received in Rome. This was not true of the official presentation sessions, which were occasions for viewing models and the marble. After the initial testing of the candidate, the viewings presented a festive occasion offering the *compagnie* with an opportunity to display its own powers of discernment. In and through these meetings, an academic ethos was expressed: members proved that they could pronounce judgments on painting and sculpture based on brisk reasonings and hard principles. Prejudices and commercial automatism, the premise of personal interests, had to wither before unflinching insight. To be sure, this appeal to noble independence should not be confused with an aesthetics of originality. Thus, the advice of the *compagnie* is likely to have played a role in the evolution of models that prepared the marbles. As a critical concept, originality only announces itself in the fierce revolt against the Academy in the 1790s.

In spite of its many legislative adaptations, the Academy never succeeded in banning grave conflicts of interests. A string of internal vicissitudes multiplied divisions within the *compagnie* and tainted the image of the society in the midst of a rising public sphere. But the failing of procedures of selection was not accompanied by the bankruptcy of the notion of the artist that the *Académie* defended: it merely led critics to claim that the

Academy was in breach of its principles.

The Academic Sculptures

The entanglement of terminology and related values between different academic occupations poses an interesting problem. Was it possible for sculptors to plan their work in the same way as writers and natural scientists did? And what enabled the beholder of a piece of academic sculpture to recognize this scheme? These are the questions addressed in Part II.

In **Chapter 6** I explore the dependence of sculptors on medical and rhetorical competences for their visualization of *mouvement*. In eighteenth-century France, *Mouvement* covered different meanings and was susceptible to attracting a theoretical interest that touched on oratorical delivery as well as medical observation. N.-S. Adam's (1705–1778) *Prométhée* and Falconet's *Milon* are two such *morceaux de réception*: the represented stories are violent and the representation is set up as a dynamic and pathetic whole. Each of these marbles has a match in alternative designs, but here the treatment of elements of iconography is identical. For both Adam and Falconet there is a sharp contrast in the treatment of the figure between the marble and the alternative design. Thus, a problem that needs to be addressed in any analysis of these works is this radical shift in figure use.

Unfortunately, because of the identical iconography, a model of iconographical analysis that departs from iconographic types and hopes to explain mutations within them by recourse to shifting attitudes to subject-matter is little actual use. An analysis of figure types as such—considered without their association with subjects—offers a better alternative. Thus, the figures chosen for the marble bear a heavy debt to a family of figures that received special attention in the Parisian Academy. A second step is to view these choices in the light of instruction. For *mouvement*, a good way to find out how the Academy adapted general precepts from rhetoric, pathognomics and other fields of knowledge, merging them into a visual example, is found in a series of descriptions of the *Laocoön* group. These descriptions are more than simple vehicles of praise; they set in effect the

passage from instruction to study.

With Falconet and Adam, adaptations are based on a network of bodily features that were apparently promoted by the Academy and that needed to appear in set combinations. For *mouvement*, the Academy espoused a harmonious coincidence of analytical diagnosis and rhetorical instruction, on divisions inspired on medical literature and rules of style that had to guarantee that the beholder was touched fittingly. Around 1750 new divisions caused illustrative diagnostics and spectacular *tout est en mouvement* to enter into conflict. A complicating factor was the reaction of an ignorant public in the Salons. This public took great delight, without recourse to any form of hard knowledge, in the sensational appearance of the *Milon en Prométhée* marbles. By contrast, the educated public did pretend to this knowledge. This was certainly true of D. Diderot (1713–1784), who in 1774 drafted a comprehensive account of Falconet's *Milon*. The text promoted a rehabilitation of the idea that medical insights and modern-day ideas on mechanisms of audience response should at all times assist artists in their figure designs.

Chapter 7 explores the advent, especially after 1730, of 'quiet' poses among sculptors' *morceaux de réception*. It disputes the notion that this trend is to be explained as a manifestation of a return to classical examples. Instead, it understands the popularity of quiet figures as a sign of the growing discrepancy between artistic study and interdisciplinary instruction. In academic writings on figure stances a separation line can be seen to appear between a physical rule that shapes a pose (*pondération*) and artistic values that tie the finding of poses to a composed whole (*contraste*). Although these divisions continue to draw on the natural sciences and rhetoric, they now also act as criteria to distinguish the figures of the sculptor from those of the painter. By avoiding active situations, the sculptor becomes increasingly dependent on stable properties of the body. Quiet stances encourage beholders to embark on a reading of discrete visual information, in order to complement the figure with features of character or an invisible scene of which they themselves become a part. Such ideas on beholder response were attached to the belief that sculptors were deprived, to a higher measure than painters, of the possibilities of illusory seduction, and that a carved

image presupposes a public that understand the act of perception as an act of deciphering. These beholders perceive through the sieve of social strata: they insert a represented figure in a social ladder, stretching from the most humble countryside folk to the most noble and dignified subjects.

Conclusion

In the **Coda** a final case study serves the purpose of looking at the standing of the sculptural trade in Paris between 1725 and 1765. The reception of Edmé Bouchardon (1698–1762) provides a good example of how academic attitudes to sculptural practices constitute a paradigm of its own, contrasting with J. J. Winckelmann (1717–1768) and Northern aesthetics in general. This difference concerns especially the fact that aesthetic writers take the work as a point of departure, whereas the *Académie* privileges the persona of the artist. Because they resort to (visual) examples, sculptors act in conformity with a range of intellectual occupations. But Caylus and Diderot agree in their conviction that the making of statues demands more than the study of examples, it requires an entire set of assumed habits of thinking and working. As such, Bouchardon's active life and his studies provided further evidence for these writers of dispositions necessary for artistic performance. It is intriguing to see that the model provided by the *Académie* no longer measured up in certain respects with the ideal of study professed by these writers in 1762.

In many respects, the trajectory that sculptors had to cover to become members of the Academy was an escape route from an ethics of commercial workshops, a sphere of artistic activity that Academy members deemed inferior. Academization meant in the first place that sculptors should organize their practices as instruments for the acquisition of knowledge. Through 'Study', discrete exercises and tasks became better interconnected, not in order to benefit a more efficient line of production, but so as to accomplish the commendable goal of perfecting one's art. *Étude* laid out a narrative that ensured that the string of necessary operations would acquire a theoretical, not only a practical sense. To some extent, these operations

were dissociated of concrete tasks for the production of a sculpture, but even more often they represented necessary actions that were placed in a new perspective and interpreted in a new way. Study was at all times an integral part of productive handwork, without ever becoming identical to it.

For an art historian there is a possibility of conducting investigations into artistic practice as a culturally determined phenomenon. In the first place, the cultural historian's perspective offers a possibility to account for the ambitions and deformations of Western thinking about art. It allows us to become intrigued again at the triumph of an aristocratic ideal of artistic production, one that until recently managed to resist the success of technological advances. In its refutation of the collaborative production, the period 1725–1765 constitutes a prelude to the nineteenth century, when the pressures of technique unleashed heated debates and when successful workshop-factories existed alongside initiatives that looked for answers to modern life in the small-scale and the personal. From a method rooted in premises of a cultural history, one can expect that it generates a new image of the transformation of art in the course of its history. It has to offer an alternative to the internalist trappings —the isolation of the artist in the atelier, the sentimentalist formulae of the 'life and work' genre— that so often cling to studies on artistic instruction and statements concerning the origination of works. Following the examples of Caylus and Diderot, one can decide to regard the manufacture of paintings and sculptures as the outcome of two things at the same time: a process of immense complexity and the expression of a systems of cultural and social values.

