INTRODUCTION

The Salon Exhibition in the Eighteenth Century and the Problem of its Public

AMBITIOUS painting most conspicuously entered the lives of eighteenth-century Parisians in the Salon exhibitions mounted by the Academy of Painting and Sculpture. These had begun as regular events in 1737; held in odd-numbered years, except for a brief early spell of annual exhibitions, they opened on the feast-day of St. Louis (25 August) and lasted from three to six weeks. During its run, the Salon was the dominant public entertainment in the city. As visual spectacle, it was dazzling: the Salon carré of the Louvre—the vast box of a room which gave the exhibition its name—packed with pictures from eye-level to the distant ceiling, the overflow of still-life and genre pictures spilling down the stairwells that led to the gallery (Plate 1); an acre of color, gleaming varnish, and teeming imagery in the midst of the tumble-down capital (the dilapidation of the Louvre itself was the subject of much contemporary complaint). “Ceaseless waves” of spectators filled the room, so the contemporary accounts tell us, the crush at times blocking the door and making movement inside impossible. The Salon brought together a broad mix of classes and social types, many of whom were unused to sharing the same leisure-time diversions. Their awkward, jostling encounters provided constant material for satirical commentary.

The success of the Salon as a central Parisian institution, however, had been many decades in the making. Its actual origins lay in the later seventeenth century, but these had not been particularly auspicious. The Academy’s initial efforts at public exhibition had been limited to a few cramped and irregular displays of pictures, first in its own meeting rooms and later in the open arcades of the adjoining Palais Royal. The disadvantage of the latter practice, according to an early account, was that the artists “had the constant worry of damage to the paintings by the weather, which pressed them often to withdraw the pictures before the curiosity of the public had been satisfied.” By 1699 the Salon was more comfortably installed inside the Louvre, and Parisians were spared the sight of academicians hustling their canvases out of the rain. By all accounts, that exhibition was a popular success, but it was almost forty years before the Salon became a permanent fixture of French cultural life.

After 1737, however, its status was never in question, and its effects on the artistic life of Paris were immediate and dramatic. Painters found themselves being exhorted in the press and in art-critical tracts to address the needs and desires of the exhibition “public”; the journalists and critics who voiced this demand claimed to speak with the backing of this public; state officials responsible for the arts fastened to assert that their
decisions had been taken in the public’s interest; and collectors began to ask, rather
ominously for the artists, which pictures had received the stamp of the public’s approval.
All those with a vested interest in the Salon exhibitions were thus faced with the task
of defining what sort of public it had brought into being.

This proved to be no easy matter, for any of those involved. The Salon exhibition
presented them with a collective space that was markedly different from those in which
painting and sculpture had served a public function in the past. Visual art had of course
always figured in the public life of the community that produced it: civic processions
up the Athenian Acropolis, the massing of Easter penitents before the portal of Chartres
cathedral, the assembly of Florentine patriots around Michelangelo’s David—these would
just begin the list of occasions in which art of the highest quality entered the life of
the ordinary European citizen and did so in a vivid and compelling way. But prior to
the eighteenth century, the popular experience of high art, however important and moving
it may have been to the mass of people viewing it, was openly determined and
administered from above. Artists operating at the highest levels of aesthetic ambition
did not address their wider audience directly; they had first to satisfy, or at least resolve,
the more immediate demands of elite individuals and groups. Whatever factors we might
name which bear on the character of the art object, these were always refracted through
the direct relationship between artists and patrons, that is, between artists and a circum-
scribed, privileged minority.

The broad public for painting and sculpture would thus have been defined in terms
other than those of interest in the arts for their own sake. In the pre-eighteenth-century examples cited above, it was more or less identical with the ritualized assembly of the political and/or religious community as a whole—and it could be identified as such. The eighteenth-century Salon, however, marked a removal of art from the ritual hierarchies of earlier communal life. There the ordinary man or woman was encouraged to rehearse before works of art the kinds of pleasure and discrimination that once had been the exclusive prerogative of the patron and his intimates. There had been precedents for this kind of exhibition, of course, in France and elsewhere in Europe: displays of paintings often accompanied the festival of Corpus Christi, for example, and there were moves underway in many places to make royal and noble collections available to a wider audience. But the Salon was the first regularly repeated, open, and free display of contemporary art in Europe to be offered in a completely secular setting and for the purpose of encouraging a primarily aesthetic response in large numbers of people.

There was in this arrangement, however, an inherent tension between the part and the whole: the institution was collective in character, yet the experience it was meant to foster was an intimate and private one. In the modern public exhibition, starting with the Salon, the audience is assumed to share in some community of interest, but what significant commonality may actually exist has been a far more elusive question. What was an aesthetic response when divorced from the small community of erudition, connoisseurship, and aristocratic culture that had heretofore given it meaning? To call the Salon audience a "public" implies some meaningful degree of coherence in attitudes and expectations: could the crowd in the Louvre be described as anything more than a temporary collection of hopelessly heterogeneous individuals? This was the question facing the members of the art world of eighteenth-century Paris. Many thought so, but the actual

2. Gabriel-Jacques de Saint-Aubin, Staircase of the Salon. 1753. Etching
attempt caused them endless difficulty. Here is one representative effort, written in 1777 by a veteran social commentator and art critic, Pidansat de Maurobert. He begins with his physical entry into the space of the exhibition (Plate 2):

You emerge through a stairwell like a trapdoor, which is always choked despite its considerable width. Having escaped that painful gauntlet, you cannot catch your breath before being plunged into an abyss of heat and a whirlpool of dust. Air so pestilential and impregnated with the exhalations of so many unhealthy persons should in the end produce either lightning or plague. Finally you are deafened by a continuous noise like that of the crashing waves in an angry sea. But here nevertheless is a thing to delight the eye of an Englishman: the mixing, men and women together, of all the orders and all the ranks of the state... This is perhaps the only public place in France where he could find that precious liberty visible everywhere in London. This enchanting spectacle pleases me even more than the works displayed in this temple of the arts. Here the Savoyard odd-job man rubs shoulders with the great noble in his cordon bleu; the fishwife trades her perfumes with those of a lady of quality, making the latter resort to holding her nose to combat the strong odor of cheap brandy drifting her way; the rough artisan, guided only by natural feeling, comes out with a just observation, at which an inept wit nearby bursts out laughing only because of the comical accent in which it was expressed; while an artist hiding in the crowd unravels the meaning of it all and turns it to his profit.5

The source of this passage is Maurobert’s clandestine news-sheet, the “English Spy,” hence the conspicuous English references. It appears as part of a lengthy and sober history of official art in France and of the public exhibitions of the Academy (as good as any the eighteenth century produced). His half-comic observations of the Salon crowd are meant to carry serious meaning and can serve to introduce the principal themes of this book.

First of all, the rhetoric of the passage points up the degree to which the “public” in the Salon defied efforts at concrete description. In its choices of metaphor it is positively at war with concreteness. Merely to enter the Salon requires a passage through a blinding vortex in which all the boundaries and distinctions which demarcate a ranked society are broken down. The result is a new social body which is seductive and enchanting in its liberated vitality, but at the same time mined with insidious hazards. Once barriers have been dissolved, social contact multiplies and expands uncontrollably like the invisible circulation of disease. The flux of the Salon crowd, likened to the commingling of heady and noxious gases, contains equal measures of vitality and peril. At the same time, this apparent chaos does in the end yield useful knowledge to the artist, knowledge free, as Maurobert states further on, from “prejudices, passions, jealousy, and servile conformity.” Wisdom emerges from the most unexpected sources, and is easily misread by the complacent and shallow. But the artist, via saturation in the fluid mass of his public, does sort it all out, does come away with new information useful, indeed essential, to his art.

The connection between the two, however, between artist and public, remains occult, the product of secret and private intelligence. Likewise, the sage response of the artisan is incomprehensible to his immediate neighbor. As we shall see repeatedly, Maurobert’s text is typical in its contradictory insistence on an undifferentiated whole while attending in detail exclusively to heterogeneity, to the particular and private. These are the con-
traditions of the term itself; the “public” is both everywhere and nowhere in particular. If we limit ourselves to a positivist historical approach, to an empirical reconstruction of the emerging Parisian art public as recorded in the surviving documents, we shall continually be left with the same split perception present in this brief account. We can and shall arrive at empirical knowledge concerning the Salon audience, because an audience is by definition an additive phenomenon: we identify, and count if possible, the individuals and groups recorded as making it up; no one who was present can be disqualified from membership. But what transforms that audience into a public, that is, a commonality with a legitimate role to play in justifying artistic practice and setting value on the products of that practice? The audience is the concrete manifestation of the public but never identical with it. In empirical terms, we are confronted only with the gross totality of the audience and its positively identifiable constituent parts: individuals and group categories defined by sex, age, occupation, wealth, residence, etc. The public, on the other hand, is the entity which mediates between the two, a representation of the significant totality by and for someone. A public appears, with a shape and a will, via the various claims made to represent it; and when sufficient numbers of an audience come to believe in one or another of these representations, the public can become an important art-historical actor.

It follows from this that the role of the new public space in the history of eighteenth-century French painting will be bound up with a struggle over representation, over language and symbols and who had the right to use them. The issue was never whether that problematic entity, the public, should be consulted in artistic matters, but who could be legitimately included in it, who spoke for its interests, and which or how many of the contending directions in artistic practice could claim its support. If the Salon as a social location seemed mystifyingly fluid and undefined, what other public spaces of assembly and shared discourse might it be like? In what ways did one’s experience there overlap with those of the festival, fair, royal entry, marketplace, theater, salesroom, court of law, church, or political demonstration? A combination of historical factors made the conflict over such questions intense, and what might otherwise have been rather esoteric questions of artistic style and subject matter were often caught up in that struggle. One way therefore to begin an account of the place of painting in the social fabric of the city will be to trace the history of this argument, and in so doing, we will begin to understand something of the intensity with which it was fought out. This chapter then will primarily be concerned with the perceptions of eighteenth-century witnesses and their disputes over perception. Subsequent chapters will try to recover as much as possible of the historical actuality underlying this war of words and to assess in detail what that meant for the practice of painting.

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Considering the casual hierarchy of the eighteenth-century debate over the Salon public, the most appropriate place to begin would be with the view of the state at the time of the revival of the Salon in 1737. The official responsible for its permanent re-establishment was the finance minister Philibert Orry. Newly appointed head of the arts administration (as Directeur-général des bâtiments), Orry seems to have carried a tendency to fiscal thinking over into his new responsibilities. The Salon, in his conception, would
be like an annual public audit of artistic productivity. The official journal, the Mercure de France, endorsed Orry’s proposal in just these terms:

...the Academy does well to render a sort of accounting to the public of its work and to make known the progress achieved in the arts it nurtures by bringing to light the work of its most distinguished members in the diverse genres it embraces, so that each thereby submits himself to the judgement of informed persons gathered in the greatest possible number and receives the praise or blame due him. This will both encourage genuine talents and unmask the false fame of those who have progressed too little in their art, but, full of pride in their illustrious company, think themselves automatically as able as their fellows and neglect their calling.  

This passage announces what will be an incessant theme in eighteenth-century discussions of art: that quality in art depends on public scrutiny, and that this quality is threatened or declines to the extent that artists restrict their audience, whether to a noble or moneyed elite or to a coterie of their fellow academicians. So declared that writer often cited as the first modern art critic, one La Font de Saint-Yenne. “It is only in the mouths of those firm and equitable men who compose the Public, who have no links whatever with the artists, ... that we can find the language of truth,” he wrote in defense of his critical pamphlet of 1747. That pamphlet, entitled Reflections on Some Causes of the Current State of Painting in France, contained a comprehensive discussion of the previous year’s Salon and proposed for the first time that a museum be established in the Louvre to provide artists and public alike with a continuing education in art history.

Following La Font’s critical sally, the volume of published comment on the exhibitions and the public functions of art expanded rapidly. Substantial numbers of critiques appeared during and after subsequent Salons, as well as more far-ranging treatises on painting intended for a general literate public. Well-established literary men and amateurs—Laugier, Sainte-Palaye, Caylus, Bachaumont—offered the Salon audience enlightened instruction and advocacy. The current Directeur-général, Lenormand de Tournehem, answered the call for a museum by putting part of the royal collection on public display two days per week in the Luxembourg Palace. This same official, whose responsibility included state patronage and the administration of the Academy, recognized the increasing importance of the Salon as an artistic forum by establishing the first Salon jury in 1748, and in general regularizing selection procedures and toughening standards. To complete the picture, the abbé Laugier (author of the widely-read and influential Essay on Architecture) confidently proposed to Tournehem that a regular arts periodical, the first of its kind, be established under his direction. He had in mind a monthly review, to be called The State of the Arts in France, composed very much like an art journal today: it was to offer feature articles on individual artists and architects, reports on the meetings of the two academies, biographies of past artists, and reviews of books. A waiting readership seemed to exist; each year the Academy had to print increasing numbers of its Salon guide and catalogue (the livret), and soon was selling them in the thousands. The official handbook was supplemented by more and more critical pamphlets, many of them illegal and anonymous, sold in the streets, cafés, and printshops of the city during the run of each exhibition. To judge from their numbers and variety, these constituted a small industry in themselves.

We could draw from all this an optimistic and affirmative picture of the new public sphere, one in which the audience (via the critics who spoke in its name) joined the
Academy and the state in fundamental agreement on principles and the direction of needed reform. Certainly since the 1912 publication of Jean Loquelin’s classic History Painting in France from 1745 to 1785,¹³ scholars have taken for granted that a rough audience/official consensus propelled painting away from privatized, sensual values of the Rococo style toward the revival of an elevated and moralizing classicism. Locquin’s opening and closing dates indicate the argument: 1747 saw La Font’s unprecedented public appeal that painters forsake the trivial and erotic for the principles of Poussin and Le Brun—high-minded themes, sober clarity of style, the example of the antique. He launched this appeal, so he claimed, only in response to a growing clamor of audience complaint.¹⁴ The preceding year had marked the advent of Tournehem’s reformist arts administration, which had the same end in view. The Salon as a public event had restored the mandate once provided by the aggressive cultural policies of Louis XIV and Colbert. In the process, direct subservience to the throne was muted and a more general notion of public service came to the fore. The engraver Cochin, then first officer of the Academy, made the connection plainly in 1757: after the death of Louis XIV, he declared:

... the art of painting languished without support or protection. ... The custom of exhibitions at the Salon was not yet in force, and we can say confidently that this fortunate institution has saved painting by a prompt display of the most deserving talents and by inspiring with a love of the arts a good number of people who, without the exhibition, would never have given them a thought.¹⁵

¹⁷⁸⁵ stands for the final success of this policy, the popular embrace of classicizing and didactic historical painting effected by Jacques-Louis David’s Oath of the Horatii (Color Plate 2). The roots of David’s overwhelming Salon successes of the 1780s are present in the convergence some forty years before between public awakening and enlightenment from above.

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The account sketched above is venerable and, I think, roughly right. But it is easily misread. The dramatic and rapid appearance of the modern art public was a much more difficult process than the standard history would indicate. The institution of a regular public audience may well have revived the old authority and priorities of state patronage, but those in charge did not want that dependence overstressed. One of the reasons we know so little about La Font is the angry, even violent reaction of the academic artists, who succeeded in hounding him back into the obscurity from which he had briefly emerged. Pamphlets and prints ridiculed and caricatured him as blind and feeble-minded, ignorant and opportunistic by turns.¹⁶ A writer close to the the academic leadership, the abbé Leblanc, produced a booklet countering La Font’s Reflections later in the same year.¹⁷ It featured a frontispiece designed by Boucher depicting a personified art of painting in despair, besieged by a hoisting crowd of harpies and asses (Plate 3). The rumor current at the time was that Leblanc had attacked La Font at the express direction of the portraitist Latour and had received in return a portrait of himself. (It was displayed in the Salon of 1747 and garnered this accolade from Leblanc himself in his published review: “The public has found the likeness of Monsieur the abbé Leblanc one of the strongest efforts ever made in any genre.”)¹⁸ La Font was personally the target of a number of satirical prints produced by other artists. A student of Premier peintre
Charles Coypel designed one which provided the critic with a blind man’s cane and dog, and Watelet, amateur honoraire in the Academy, engraved it (Plate 5). Another, accompanied by the caption “La fontaine de St. Innocent,” shows him mindlessly examining the Paris landmark under a magnifying glass. The pun on his name tags him as a village idiot, an innocent, while the image depicts him as one (Plate 6). The artists reacted with more than propaganda: in 1749, as an open protest against the new critical climate, they refused even to hold an exhibition.19 Two years later, the cream of the Academy—Boucher, Coypel, Natoire, Bouchardon—still refused to submit work.

The reaction at the state level was hardly more encouraging. Tournechem, far from endorsing La Font’s public campaign, declared himself “outraged indeed that illegal pamphlets should afflict our artists with the stupidities they can peddle. The best response would be simple contempt, and this should shut up their impertinent authors.”20 The Directeur-général also moved in more concrete ways. His establishment of the Salon jury was largely a preemptive move to protect artists from further insult by screening out the works most likely to provoke it.21 Cochin, despite having consistently praised the salutary influence of public opinion on the arts, branded La Font as “that ignoramus who sounded the charge in the war being waged on the arts and on the most distinguished

3. After François Boucher, Painting mocked by Envy, Stupidity, and Drunkenness. Frontispiece to the abbé Leblanc, Lettre sur l’exposition, 1747. Etching

artists.”22 And as for Laugier’s proposed journal of art and architecture, Cochin, in his capacity as secretary to the Academy, rendered this opinion:

This sort of publication can degenerate in no time to criticisms, mockery, and baseless judgements. Any writer will soon persuade himself that negativity amuses the public and can sell his work. Self-interest runs the show, and it will become no more than a periodical series of insults which would aggrieve our artists, close the studios, and ruin public exhibitions, which are more useful to the arts than are the arguments of literary men who know next to nothing.23

The new Directeur-général, the marquis de Marigny, refused Laugier his necessary permission.

As fast as the components of the artistic public sphere had appeared, they were variously denounced, ridiculed, suppressed, or ignored by the Academy and the responsible state officials. Public access to the Luxembourg Palace collection was allowed to lapse; the proposal for a museum in the Louvre languished for decades while similar museums were opening all over Europe. The following decade, the 1760s, stands out in the history of modern art criticism because of Diderot’s monumental commentaries on the Salon; but it needs to be recalled that he was writing only for a small, international circle of titled subscribers to Melchior Grimm’s Correspondence littéraire. At home almost no Salon criticism of substance was available. Cochin had by this time taken steps to force the unofficial critics to submit their work to the state censor and was attempting,
with some success, to ban critical anonymity. Clandestine critiques remained in circulation (Diderot’s texts received some limited domestic distribution in manuscript), but the pressure was kept on: in 1769 the Academy had a relatively inoffensive piece of light satire by Daudet de Jossan seized by the police. Nothing like lively public debate on the Salon would be seen until the 1770s and ’80s, and it would be strongly resisted even then. In pre-Revolutionary Paris, public discourse on art would never achieve uncontested legitimacy.

If there was a marriage between the interests of the Academy, the state, and the public in these years, it was a troubled one. The two statements by Cochin quoted above indicate the difficulty: the Salon and its audience were the salvation of serious painting, yet that audience was in the market chiefly for negativity and slander; for the public to have a voice of its own would be the ruin of established artistic careers and of the Salon itself. It is a peculiar proposition, that there be a public arena yet at the same time no public speech, no regular medium for the expression of unofficial opinion. Cochin is utterly forthright on this. In direct response to La Font’s contrary claim, he wrote in the Mercure: “I hold the principle that a painting, a statue, do not [my emphasis] belong to the public in the same way that a book does.” And La Font’s asserted modesty of purpose, that he wrote only to voice “the complaints of the public as much concerning the sterility and lack of inspiration in the choices of subject as the stiffness and mediocrity of the execution,” elicited from Coupel—the artist at the top of the academic hierarchy—that impassioned denial that the Salon audience constituted a public at all:

Myself, I maintain that in the Salon where the paintings are displayed, the public changes twenty times a day. What the public admires at ten o’clock in the morning, is publicly condemned at noon. Yes, I tell you, this place can offer twenty publics of different tone and character in the course of a single day: a simple public at certain times, a prejudiced public, a flighty public, an envious public, a public slavish to fashion, which in order to judge wants to see everything and examine nothing. I can assure you that a final accounting of these publics would lead to infinity. I must allow that the Salon can always be filled with these same kinds of people, but believe me, after having heard them all, you will have heard not a true public, but only the mob, and not at all that public on which we should rely. Let us not confuse the one with the other; the mob at first rushes forward passionately, speaks with vehemence, fears to waste in reflection those few moments it devotes to its oracular pronouncements. But time in the end moderates its passions: it is then that one is able to hear the knowing public that the mob hides in its midst and whose voice it smothers.

To conjure up the spectre of a coherent, engaged, and demanding public, this was a sufficient sin in the eyes of Cochin, Coupel, Tournehem, and company to consign La Font to outer darkness. Certainly there was nothing in the actual substance of his criticism to justify their implacable hostility, little that differed from the stated principles of his opponents (thus the false impression, as noted above, of a broad anti-Rococo consensus). What is striking about La Font’s Reflections, given the violent reaction to it, is its moderate, even tentative character. Though he presents himself as one compelled to speak out by the serious decline of French painting from its unchallenged preeminence in the later seventeenth century, his comments on the pictures he chooses to discuss are largely positive and admiring. He is quick to say, despite his reformist stance, that he is “very far from believing that French genius is extinguished or its vigor entirely depleted.” And
his praise, even flattery at times, for the best-known painters of the day—Carle Van Loo, Restout, Parrocel, Coycel—owe the any fault-finding. He praises not only the religious and historical works exhibited by these artists, but also the lower-ranking landscapes of Joseph Vernet and the genre scenes of Oudry. Boucher’s sumptuous images are the only works that come off at all badly in his commentary. (What is more, his fellow unofficial critics so outdid him in general inoffensiveness that in 1754 an exasperated La Font attacked the lot of them for their unrelieved blandness; but it was not until this date that La Font himself produced anything like a severe critique—and it was also his last.) The problem then is to account for the vehement opposition of the artists, their official patrons, and their supporters in the press to even this extremely circumscribed public discussion. Why did La Font’s safe and undisputed program become a threat when argued in public?

Whatever their complaints, artists today live on critical attention—and can die professionally from the lack of it. But it is really no surprise that in 1747 artists should have resented a public criticism that promised them no material advantage and seemed indeed to threaten the opposite. What they saw was propaganda coming from an influential quarter which singled out for disapproval all of the most lucrative forms of painting. Paris in the 1740s was in the midst of a building boom, one largely fuelled by the construction of luxurious hôtels for the court and financial elite. Since the decline and death of Louis XIV, the life of that elite had made its way back from Versailles to the city. The owners of these new town mansions required quantities of small-scale decorative pictures, tapestry designs, and family portraits. This was the period when Parisian aristocratic life had evolved into an intensely personal theater of social and erotic intrigue, one played out in interiors appropriately intimate in scale, luxuriant and ornate in their décor, and bright with reflective surfaces of mirror and gilt. The qualities that distinguish the Rococo style—its playful and erotic subject matter, yielding and pliant surface patterns, combined delicacy and exuberance of touch, texture, and color—represent both a projection of and euphemism for the forms of life it adorned.

The way was open for skilled producers of decorative Rococo painting to become quite wealthy: Boucher was earning 50,000 livres per year for his steady output of loves of the gods, amorous shepherds, and fantasy landscapes. (By comparison, an average comfortable bourgeois, living on revenues from bonds or real estate, earned 3,000–4,000 livres; the salary of a professor at the Sorbonne was about 1,900.) Latour asked and got 48,000 livres for a portrait of Mme. de Pompadour, the King’s favorite and the leading patron of the period. Joseph Vernet’s picturesque landscapes, harbor scenes, and stormy coasts were also much in demand; he earned close to a million livres over his career, and his pictures were generally spoken for before they left the studio.

Had Vernet heeded his admirers among the unofficial critics and turned his talents to large-scale narrative painting, there would have been no more buyers lining up. For history painting in the grand manner, too large in size and ponderous in character for the intimate aristocratic interiors of the day, the state was the only support in sight. And state patronage was erratic at best and often absent altogether. The official program for the support of serious painters just did not amount to much in material terms. If an artist received a commission, it could be years before he was fully paid for his work.
Even then, the price of a major painting, which required a large workshop and months of labor, was set at between four and six thousand livres.\textsuperscript{32} For the sake of tradition and institutional prestige, history painting went on, but neither the state nor the established artists could have afforded a much greater devotion to the genre. Tournehem's first effort to re-establish the priority of history painting—eleven commissions to be displayed in the Galerie d'Apollon in the Louvre—was notably unconvincing. These had been passed among the top academicians, and the choice of subject, provided it was in the historical genre, had been left to each of the chosen artists. The results, when they were first displayed in public, succeeded only in drawing the first sustained attack on the Academy in harshly specific terms. An anonymous pamphlet of 1749 savaged the artists for their selection of tired and irrelevant themes and the implicit contempt thereby shown for the interests of the Salon public:

The “Rape of Europa” [by Boucher (Plate 7)], isn’t that a bit worn out? “Pyrrhus at the Court of Glaucus” [by Collin de Vermont] is a subject which is little known and even less interesting. And what a lovely gift to offer a king in need of a tableau d’histoire, this “Diogenes Drinking from his Hand after Breaking his Cup” [by Etienne Jeurat]. As far as their execution is concerned, it was of such a quality that they were all relegated to the storerooms. I say then that when the Academy has performed so poorly in terms of both content and form, there can be no doubt that it has collapsed.\textsuperscript{33}
It was not until 1765, almost two decades later, that another major initiative in state support for classical painting was undertaken: four pictures depicting good deeds of the Roman emperors destined for the royal residence at Choisy. The public, by all accounts, greeted them with indifference, and the King refused them. The program went back on the shelf for another decade.

So long, therefore, as the voice of the public was linked to an unappealing, indeed impossible, shift in the economic underpinnings of the art world, it was bound to be rejected by those inside that world. There was no confident, open-handed state agency to bring it off and thus no possible return to the days when Colbert had put the Academy at the centre of a flourishing official culture. The monarchy was retreating more and more into the pleasures of sport and domestic life, and the purposes of the Academy no longer coincided with the needs of its principal patron. On one side then were private patrons whose demands were familiar and remunerative; on the other was the mob in the Salon: shifting, heterogeneous, largely anonymous, unstable in its demands if it had any, and for the most part not in the market for pictures. The sheer spectacle of the thing was bound to make artists and authorities uneasy: jammed, noisy, sweaty, as much urban festival as occasion for considered aesthetic experience. They must have asked themselves what in the world they were to make of that crowd. What if, God forbid, artists' reputations should come to depend on what it thought—or on what its opinion was said to be? How could they know in advance what was appropriate, what would appeal?

For the established painters of the period, as we have seen, the question was not even worth answering. Faced with an opaque Salon audience and carping critics who claimed their unpalatable program was the demand of that audience, Cochin and Coypel declared that claim a lie. Yes, there was an enlightened public for painting, but it was not that crowd, which concealed rather than embodied it. The critics were no more than self-seeking literary upstarts, trying to make cheap reputations by causing sensation at the artist's expense. Public criticism, in fact, constituted for them an illegitimate annexation of painting to the alien practices of literary men. In Leblanc's words,

The desire to make a name is the only motive behind such work; the public interest is no more than a pretext. They want to be read, and they choose this genre over another because they have seen these critiques succeed. The author's profession is most often a mere trade. . . . A man who arrives in Paris with neither means nor talent has only to advertise himself in a brochure as a man of taste and he will instantly be somebody; his words are taken to heart; the doors of the rich are open to him; he will pay his court to these haughty patrons, and in turn will see artists pay their court to him out of fear that he will damn their works; finally he will pass for a "connoisseur" according to those who take nonsense for the language of the arts. . . . This character, who is one of the absurdities of our time, would be an excellent subject for a comedy, but it would appeal only to those initiated into the mysteries of the arts. . . .

The critics were being read, that much is clear, and read in influential circles. Leblanc concedes their impact and personal success. And there were more pamphlets to be read than the handful that have survived. We hear continually in the anti-critical literature of a "horde of libellers" unleashed at the opening of every Salon—the term libelle referring to a brand of insulting and personal scandal sheet which was the staple product of an
irrepressible clandestine press. La Font, by 1752, felt it necessary publicly to disassociate himself from a number of such indecorous and cutting critiques which were being laid at his door. His opponents nevertheless held him responsible for opening the gates to the Salon libelles if not actually producing them.

The note of panic evident in all these official reactions—critics could close the studios, ruin the arts—is real. It was precisely the dependence of artists on a private and increasingly privatized market that created fear of even an image of articulate public opinion. That market, though familiar, was not necessarily secure. Artists were beholden to a narrow clientele, obsessed with shifting, elusive nuances of style and motif. Successfully negotiating such a market was difficult enough; a further variable affecting an artist’s value, that is, perceived Salon success as a separate quantity, was decidedly unwelcome. Beyond Paris, there were provincial and foreign markets closely attentive to shifts of taste in the French capital. The anonymous author of that sarcastic dismissal of Tournemire’s Galerie d’Apollon commissions went on to explain the cancellation of the 1749 Salon in these terms. He takes issue with the notion that the artists had withdrawn simply to avoid gratuitous and self-seeking criticism; they were afraid, he claims, that the unofficial pamphlets, when distributed in the provinces, would be taken to represent Parisian opinion. The critics, further, were creating a new kind of patron at home, so Cochin complained in 1757: alongside the genial followers of fashion had emerged a group of patrons who had taken the exacting jargon of Salon criticism for their own, a “swarm of would-be connoisseurs whose entire perception is limited to discovering faults in the most beautiful works.” More than the larger audience, it was this group which “afflicted the artists and put them off displaying their work in public.”

When La Font asserted that a picture on exhibition was like a book in print or a play on the stage, it was probably the latter analogy that more alarmed the likes of Leblanc, Cochin, and Cypel. In this period, the success and failure of plays and playwrights were already being determined by a vocal audience of mixed class and station. The most important part of the audience at the Comédie française, as far as the fate of a production was concerned, was called the parterre after the open space in front of the stage where about half of the spectators stood during the performance. Admission to this section was reasonably inexpensive, and the majority of the standees made no secret of their opinions. Plays often began with some difficulty because of disorder in the parterre and then were commonly interrupted by its interventions; the repetition of popular lines might be demanded, and unpopular ones occasionally caused performances to be halted altogether. The success of a new play depended so much on the reaction of the parterre that authors as renowned as Voltaire felt it necessary to organize claques which would create the impression of loudly favorable responses to their work. Diderot led such claques on behalf of his friends.

Almost all successful writers in the eighteenth century relied for their living on personal aristocratic patronage, and the Comédie, as a privileged corporation holding a monopoly on the production of serious plays, was free to make its own determinations. But the tumult of the parterre, its creation of a public verdict known immediately in every café, had a direct effect on attendance and a long-term effect on a writer’s continued enjoyment of patronage and privilege. The efforts of Voltaire and Diderot surreptitiously to sway opinion speak not only of the audience’s importance but also of its unpredictability. Political disputes and scandals brought in from outside the theater were often a factor in its responses, and these changed from week to week. Its social composition was hard to
read. Aristocrats abandoned the *petites loges* for the standing crowd; the author's friends, protectors, and rivals were to be found there as well, in the midst of the meanest scribblers from the Palace of Justice. The core of that crowd seems to have been drawn from the legal profession, the most socially mobile and socially ambiguous segment of the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie. In the heat of the performance, they became one body, or so it seemed: in the words of one sympathetic observer writing at the end of the century, they were “that illustrious *parterre* which reigned in so much glory for almost ninety years.”

This was a precise picture of the Academy's nightmare: a loud, demonstrative *parterre* transferred to the Salon, the critics leading the claques, the painters' clientele mixed in with it and swayed by its volatile responses. The popular critics made this fear explicit: advised one in 1773, “Distinguish well between the public that repeats and the public that sees. It is the latter that makes its judgements from the *parterre* and in the Salon; the former judges only by what it hears.” The same author then offers a chilling—for the artist—example of how the verdict of fashion might be reversed in the public exhibition: “The charming Taraval [Hughes Taraval (1729–1795). He first exhibited in the Salon of 1765] who so comfortably enjoys his facile renown in the hall of some town mansion, having imprudently risked sending two sketches for ceilings to the Salon, was publicly brought to justice. God have mercy on the poor condemned man.”

It was not the existence of the public audience in itself that promised a *parterre* in the Salon; for better or worse, the institutional purpose of the Academy was now bound up with the exhibition. But a public sphere of discussion, debate, and free exchange of opinion was something else again. No longer, it seemed, would non-initiates be awed at a distance by the splendor of a culture in which they had no share; a vocal portion of the Salon audience, egged on by self-interested critics, would actively be disputing existing hierarchical arrangements. And in the volatile social atmosphere of the exhibition, dissident opinion could spread like contagion to the artist's normal patrons. This was the threat that La Font and the rest represented to those in authority. An anonymous letter on the Salon of 1748 confirms what has been stated above concerning official anxiety of the stability of the markets. The imposition of an exhibition jury in that year is interpreted as a conscious effort to deprive the critics of material for discussion (vain hope) and so limit their impact on taste, while at the same time effecting a complementary internal discipline inside the Academy:

The judges will admit only those that they deem worthy to be endorsed by the Academy, whose purpose is not to be informed by the judgement of the public—the Academy considers itself entirely informed already—but to receive the public's applause and praise and to stimulate it to take advantage of the talents so brilliantly in evidence. . . . First of all, the critics will have little to attack. Subsequently, the public will know those artists who can be confidently trusted with commissions, and finally, they [the academicians] will be able to cast off without fuss those stubborn spirits who disturb the deliberations of the company by taking an academy for a republic.

This is of course a hostile account, but seen in any light, Tournehem and company were plainly working to limit the permitted space of public opinion to the narrowest possible confines, if not to suppress its existence altogether.
That determination may now appear poignant or comic in its doomed refusal of the inevitable. But we need to entertain the possibility that Coypel, Cochin, Leblanc, Boucher, and their colleagues were right, that the Salon audience of eighteenth-century Paris was so fragmented, distracted, and incoherent that it did not deserve the title of “public”. This is to say that it could present no useful demands or criteria to which an artist could respond. It certainly enjoyed no “natural” affinity with much of the work on display. Through the first several decades of Salons, there were almost no pictures produced primarily to be shown there; they were works of art meant for other places and other onlookers. There were pieces of Rococo confection looking naked in the cavernous space, rows of interchangeable portraits, and high above, the large history paintings, their life-size figures reduced by the distance to the scale of miniatures (Plate 8). Though ostensibly the most “public” in their purpose, these last were not only physically remote from the Salon visitor, but difficult to decipher once seen. A literate Parisian would have had a certain degree of familiarity with the motifs and narratives of classical literature, more than is usually recognized today, but academic artists tended to choose subjects few viewers would have understood adequately. Tournehem’s Galerie d’Apollon commissions demonstrated this in 1747. Later in the century, a trend towards esoteric episodes from Homer drew much complaint from the popular critics. The recondite character of this sort of literary subject matter, its meaning often carried in details and stylistic nuances nearly invisible from the gallery floor, plainly communicated the ambivalence of the Academy toward the business of public exhibition. There was an inevitable gap in comprehension which distinguished the secondary from the primary consumers of art.
The placement of pictures on the walls of the Salon was, of course, partly the result of practical necessity: the lower sections were packed with small pictures so they could be seen. The elevated placement of history painting in the Salon did not represent a willful withdrawal of access, but it did unavoidably express the contradictory character of the public exhibition under the Old Regime. What, after all, would ambitious painting be like if it were not learned and difficult, artificial and self-referential in style, aspiring to the sophistication of literary classicism and the audience that all this implied? It would have been difficult to find some available point of reference by which a care-worn merchant or apprentice clerk could genuinely participate in that culture. Everyday life, its physical imprint on the body, its costume, texture, and grit: include more than a hint of that and you have fatally compromised the desired nobility of the form. This is a period, we need to remind ourselves, when individuals and spheres of human life were rigorously distinguished and ranked on a scale of intrinsic value. The hierarchy of genres was, for the eighteenth century, a translation into cultural terms of the division of persons between noblesse and roture. Here, for example, is one eighteenth-century art critic defending that hierarchy and then moving on to maintain that even the physical constitutions of noble persons (the overriding figural concern of history painting) were different from those of the non-noble:

The sublimity of a simple tale is not that of an epic. The good family father, the return of the nurse, the village bride, all make charming scenes. But should you transform these humble actors into Consuls or Roman matrons, or in place of the invalid grandfather suppose a dying Emperor, you will see that the malady of a hero and that of a man of the people are in no way the same, anymore than are their healthy constitutions. The majesty of a Caesar demands a character which should make itself felt in every form and movement of the body and soul.46

This is, to be sure, a distinction present in poetics since antiquity and in art theory since the Renaissance at least. It is telling, however, that the source of this passage is an anonymous pamphlet by a popular critic. This writer's position in cultural politics was one of liberal opposition to what he and others of his type regarded as the mendacity and sterile despotism of the academic hierarchy. Yet such critics found it difficult or impossible to imagine a democratic painting, that is, an art which did not make implicit distinctions among spectators in terms of social class. As it stood, history painting would speak through a repertoire of signs over which the typical Salon-goer would have little command.

The date of this text is 1773, and by this time popular criticism has re-emerged, following much the same line as La Font had done two decades before—though with more irony and seasoned bitterness—and still meeting the same kind of resistance. Its claims on behalf of the Salon audience put even more stress on the liberating and egalitarian implications of its assembly within the public exhibition. And at the same time, the difficulty in reconciling theory and practice became correspondingly sharper. In 1777, for example, the reviewer in a dissenting newsheet called the Mémoires secrets pronounced himself unable to follow normal critical custom and treat the pictures in the order of their relative public success: the Salon, he states, had become a hollow, self-justifying spectacle, and the interest of its audience went no further than a routinized and conformist enthusiasm for its habitual entertainments:
The Salon, sir, attracts this year the same swelling crowd as is customary; but this is less for the sake of the masterpieces on display than as a result of routine inertia, and that excitements which the crowd senses in its own movements. The moment one enters the gallery, one finds cold and distracted spectators regarding one another rather than the works that enrich the Salon and that produce no sensation in their collective soul. It is rare when, out of this multitude of pictures, it is not one of the least that lifts the boredom of a frivolous people, fond only of novelty, whose restless curiosity has well earned the epithets burlesque and badaud. 47

In that last sentence, this observer evokes the marginal diversions of street fairs and the haphazard “events” that punctuate any large gathering (“badaud” signifies the idle gawker, unemployed, wandering the streets hungry for any distraction, uselessly underfoot when it occurs.) The milieu is irredeemably common, and it is a vain hope that art might elevate the crowd to some adequately concentrated and ennobled state of mind.

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This split allegiance to hierarchical culture and democratic reception appears dramatically in the most prominent body of radical criticism produced in the decade before the Revolution: a series of anonymous pamphlets written, according to contemporary testimony, by Louis de Carmontelle, comic playwright, high-society portraitist, engineer, landscape architect, fabled wit, and protected intimate of the court of the ducs d’Orléans. 48 The first of these tracts on the Salon appeared in 1779, the last in 1789, and together they provide the most sustained attention to the role of art in society to be found in eighteenth-century criticism (as well as some of its best literary moments). In the 1785 critique, the description of the audience presents a picture of group opinion formation right out of classic democratic theory: the exhibition, he states, is

a vast theater where neither rank, favor, nor wealth can reserve a place for bad taste.

. . . Paris comes alive, all classes of citizens come to pack the Salon. The public, natural judge of the fine arts, already renders its verdict on the merits of pictures which two years of labor have brought forth. Its opinions, at first unsteady and tentative, quickly gain stability. The experience of some, the enlightenment of others, the extreme sensibilité of one segment, and above all the good faith of the majority, arrive finally to produced a judgement all the more equitable in that the greatest liberty has presided there. 49

Like all liberal theories of democratic pluralism, this picture is meant to recognize the inevitably fractured and conflicted character of its object, but at the same time to transform that very heterogeneity into the means by which ultimate coherence and harmony are achieved. Indeed, well before this liberalism could be tried out in the larger arena of political life, the exhibition space provided a kind of temporary model in microcosm, one which fascinated opponents of absolutism (the pre-Revolutionary Marat for one 50). It was even possible for a writer like Carmontelle to imagine that a public unified in its engagement with art might be the foundation of a new, liberal social order; as he declared in 1779 in his very first Salon critique:

Let us preserve ourselves from the belief that servitude is the natural condition of man; let us be fully persuaded that he must freely exercise all his faculties. Between
the treacherous sociability of civilized men, who are slaves, and the fierce hostility of the savage who fears to become so, I conceive a sentiment worthy of unifying the human species; this is the passionate love for the fine arts.\textsuperscript{51}

Carmontelle’s actual experience in the Salon, however, made it impossible to maintain this aesthetic utopianism without wavering. We discover this in one of the rare instances—rare for Carmontelle and for any eighteenth-century writer—when the audience is described in some detail. From the following passage, it is difficult to imagine much if any commonality of expectation and purpose, any collective accord:

The Salon opens and the crowd presses through the entrance; how its diversity and turbulence disturbs the spectator! This person here, moved by vanity, wants only to be the first to give his opinion; that one there, moved by boredom, searches only for a new spectacle. Here is one who treats pictures as simple items of commerce and concerns himself only to estimate the prices they will fetch; another hopes only that they will provide material for his idle chat. The amateur examines them with a passionate but troubled eye; the painter’s eye is penetrating but jealous; the vulgarian’s is comical but stupid. The inferior class of people, accustomed to adjusting its tastes to those of its masters, waits to hear a titled person before rendering its opinion. And wherever one looks, countless young clerks, merchants, and shop assistants in whom unchanging, tedious daily labor has inevitably extinguished all feeling for beauty: here nevertheless are the men whom every artist has endeavoured to please.\textsuperscript{52}

Reading this account, we are reminded of Coypel’s imperious dismissal of the public some four decades earlier. Carmontelle has no use whatever (as we shall see presently) for painters like Coypel, as Coypel has none for unofficial critics. But their perceptions are fundamentally in agreement. There is closer observation from Carmontelle: the intrusion of calculating dealers, the manifest lack of connection between the works on offer and the “unchanging, tedious daily labor” which formed the sensibility of the majority of the spectators, the passivity and finally the boredom of the artisan-class members of the audience, the imperious if ignorant assurance of the rich and titled. But both painter and critic see in the Salon a raw, unassimilated, hopelessly heterogeneous congregation of classes and interests. Artists, both agree, look in vain for useful direction or guidance from the crowd.

Nowhere in the extensive eighteenth-century literature on the Salon do we find this gap bridged; the disparity between a public evoked in abstract terms and an actual audience whose behavior can only be characterized as a collection of vagrant individual responses. Carmontelle believes—believes with passion and anger—in the new public role for art, yet is unable actually to describe it in operation. His long, pejorative description of the Salon scene, with its mean streak of snobbery, is an exceptional moment of failure in his effort to reiterate an image of purposeful and coherent public opinion. As noted above, it is exceptional not only in the writing of this critic, but in the contemporary literature as a whole. For the most part, the concrete character of the crowd is never attended to at all.

One of the few additional accounts we have is, however, particularly interesting in this regard, in that it reproduces the split perception of Carmontelle, but does so within a single narrative sequence and without apparent sense of contradiction. It comes from
that encyclopedic portrait of Paris in the later eighteenth century, Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s *Tableau de Paris*. Mercier first describes the Salon as the very image of incoherence, conjuring up a mob of low-lifers confronting the classics with only the common coin of superstition and popular culture in hand:

The sacred, the profane, the pathetic, the grotesque; the pictures offer every subject of history and myth all in a jumble; the sight is confusion itself, and the spectators form no less motley a crowd than the objects they contemplate. A typical idler takes the characters of myth to be heavenly saints, Typhoeus to be Gargantua, Charon to be St. Peter, a satyr to be a demon, and Noah’s Ark to be the Auxerre coach.

Then, without a pause, he seems to shift his ground completely:

All the same, this populace, which has no sophisticated understanding of painting, moves unerringly and by instinct to the most striking pictures, the most true. That is to say, it is the judge of the truth of natural appearances, and all pictures, in the final analysis, are made to be judged by the eyes of the people.

In assessing Mercier, we need to allow for irony and humorous exaggeration; the *Tableau* is a work of satire as much as one of observation. But certainly his stated populism here is genuine. Frustrated in his own more elevated literary ambitions, Mercier was no friend of established cultural hierarchies. This is evident further down in the text when he makes it plain that it is history painting, not the domestic and landscape genres, which has been displaced from the top rung of the social ladder; when he speaks of the public’s instinctive attraction to the truth of nature, he does not mean a truth to be found within the comfortable range of its everyday experience. No longer guided by “monkish fanaticism” or base adulation, the noblest genre has become common property: “Painting in the last century,” he states, “seemed to belong only to the church and to kings; it toiled only for temples and palaces: for this reason, the history painters waxed proud and wanted to hold the first rank. And they retain that rank so long as they join noble and engaging subjects to fine execution. . . .” Thus, while he does not in the end contest the preeminence of history painting, he does dispute its previous legitimation and proposes a new rationale: its status is now contingent on the maintenance of certain standards which are essentially public in nature, that is, on a collective ratification of its claims which could be withdrawn.

Mercier’s is a casual and wandering text, but perhaps for that reason puts together recognitions that others do not, ones that we have found scattered and isolated through the documents discussed above. We might list them in the following way:

1. His perspective on the Salon is historical and political. Painting of the first rank once served the needs of domination; the eighteenth century had witnessed an irrevocable shift in priority: “. . . all pictures, in the final analysis, are made to be judged by the eyes of the people.”

2. The history painters were not, even in the 1780s, entirely reconciled to this change. They saw their rank as fixed for all time, assured by art’s necessary orders. But Mercier situates that rank (accurately) in the seventeenth-century alliance between art and power. To the extent that the arrangements of power were disputable, as they were proving to be, the standing of history painting was disputable. Because the artists had come to choose more suitable subjects “belonging to morality . . . and patriotism,” the public still conceded it first place, but retained the right not to do so.
3. The public puts the Salon in its own order, makes its just determinations, with little or no help from above. The physical arrangement of the exhibition, as well as the distribution of types and subjects of paintings, were “pêle-mêle arrangés,” and presented little coherent order to the spectator (this despite the very deliberate order by genre and academic rank which actually went into the hanging). Sophistication in the existing rules and practices of art is in itself suspect and, in any event, irrelevant to perceiving the truth or falsehood of the work of art.

4. Consistent with this stance, Mercier represents the Salon as fundamentally a “popular” event, in several senses of the word. First, it is attractive and interesting to large numbers of people; it provides a sense of occasion and public focus like no other cultural venue: “Neither literature nor music obtains so great a number of enthusiasts,” he states at the outset; “the crowds flock there; the waves of people do not subside from morning until night during six whole weeks; there are times when one is choked.” Second, the Salon provides an occasion for the manifestation of a popular identity and assertiveness opposed to the elite and propertied. This is implicit, I think, in the passages quoted above, and it surfaces explicitly in Mercier’s denunciation of the large numbers of portraits on display:

What is wearying and at times revoltng is to find a crowd of busts and painted portraits of nameless people, and more often those engaged in anti-popular pursuits. What are we to make of these financiers, these middle-men, these unknown countresses, these indolent marquises . . . as long as the brush sells itself to idle opulence, to mincing coquetterie, to snobbish fatuousness, the portrait should remain in the boudoir; but it should never affront the vision of the public in the place where the nation hastens to visit!

This was a venerable critical complaint, but Mercier revives it with an extra polemical edge. There is again the implication that the Salon, as officially organized, was at variance with its proper function, that it inappropriately mixed privatized and oppressive modes of art with genuinely public ones. The Academy was in league with the powerful in unacceptable ways, and popular consciousness was the corrective to that tendency. Third, and this must be advanced far more speculatively, the crowd draws on a reservoir of “popular” materials distinct from the elite culture on display—Gargantua, demons, Christian legend. Again, Mercier may be reaching for humorous contrast, but the reference is made with some specificity and even affection. Might these Salon visitors be able to deflate the pretensions of patrons and painters because they have an alternative culture at their disposal? And shall we therefore, as we attempt to describe the beginnings of the artistic public sphere, have to take that other, abiding level of culture into account?

This last point is at best no more than a hint, and we should not want to build a case on any of the elements of Mercier’s account. Certainly, as much as any of the others we have considered, it evades any direct, dispassionate description of the audience and the specifics of its engagement with high art; as much as ever, invisibility and exclusion from language characterize contemporary apprehension of our subject. Having assembled representative examples of most of the surviving commentaries on the Salon audience, we find ourselves at the apparent limits of empirical documentation and still frustratingly far from a satisfactory picture of the Salon public, its internal dynamics, and its impact on eighteenth-century painting. If that picture fails to cohere, however, it remains an open question whether more evidence of the same kind, should it exist, would make