giving of themes to the artist, or the patron or artist’s finding of themes in sacred or textual sources. If these themes were not known, they were at the very least recognisable to the artist and the members of the court, society, confraternity, and so on who were the work’s intended audience. Modern artists had to find their forms. These forms were often new to the artist and the audience. Working under the sign of the loss of the known image, it would make sense that modern artists would seize on the vivacity of the artwork, on its making and effects, rather than on iconography. Liebermann, Guston, and Bacon, to name a few of the modern artists, remarked on the vivacity and mystery of Rembrandt’s art.

Modern artists not only charged ahead, they also looked back. While many wanted to break with artistic tradition, as the theory of the avant-garde has taught us to expect, others found inspiration in the art of the past, even though what they created may look nothing like what they saw. Art history’s reliance on style and iconography has promoted comparison based on visual and textual resemblance. In the case of modern art, these methods have hindered the discovery of deeper, less visually apparent, links between the old and the new. Perhaps we might finally allow modern artists their own estimation of Rembrandt, and of the art of the past. Art history would surely be the richer for it. These two books, which invite us to see and evaluate the artist’s work, also help us to think about modernism and Rembrandt.

Notes

1. See the editorial by Christopher White, ‘The Rembrandt Research Project and Its Denouement’ The Burlington Magazine, vol. CLVII, February 2015, pp. 71–3. This is not to suggest that Wetering’s 2014 publication is first to move beyond connoisseurship. Innovative studies have considered the role of studio practice and explored the question of gender, to cite only two of the avenues explored in recent years.

2. Alison McQueen, Rembrandt in Nineteenth-Century France (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003). In the 1840s, copper plate engraving was taught at the Academy but not etching.

3. Catherine B. Scallen, Rembrandt, Reputation, and the Practice of Connoisseurship (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), provides the fullest context of Rembrandt connoisseurship. Charlotte Klönk, ‘Angespannte Verhältnisse. Universitätsprofessoren und ihre Kollegen an den Berliner Museen um 1900’, In der Mitte Berlins. 200 Jahre Kunstgeschichte an der Humboldt-Universität, eds Horst Bredenkamp and Adam S. Labuda (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 2010), pp. 191–206, offers a fascinating glimpse of how the museum, the university, and the cultural sphere were interwoven through Bode’s activity.


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Between the _vrai_ and the _beau_ of Institutional History

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It is said that Leo Tolstoy created 160 characters for his epic novel _War and Peace_; Christian Michel’s magisterial book _L’Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture: La naissance de l’école française_ probably exceeds that number in its account of the history of one of the most influential art institutions through its 150 years existence. This history begins in 1648 when a group of artists petitioned the young king, Louis XIV, asking him to take painters and sculptors under royal protection against the Maîtrise, a remnant of the medieval guild economy. The new institution was baptised an académie royale, a name that inscribed the arts of painting and sculpture in France to the tradition of the liberal arts, while simultaneously linking them to the concurrent system of power. The story ends in August 1793 when a decree of the National Convention dissolved the Académie de peinture et de sculpture along with other royal academies of the Ancien Régime. During this period, the Académie counted more than five hundred artists of different professions, numerous officers, and secretaries, along with their royal protectors, directors, and the Académie’s lay supporters, grouped under the rubric of ‘amateurs’. In addition to this weighty human constituency, the history of this institution included an innumerable quantity of painted, sculpted, and printed objects produced by artists, of which only a small fraction have secured a distinct place in the art-historical canon of today. The more ephemeral but no less crucial part of this history resided in discourses, lectures, and other forms of critical thinking produced in the name of or in opposition to the
Académie. Michel uses his remarkable expertise in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French art and theory to examine the multiple exigencies of institutional history. His confidence and knowledge of the complex body of materials, particularly of the original documents, constituting the Académie’s history, guide the reader through his voluminous book, which is supported by an extensive bibliography.¹

Stemming from its Platonic origin, the word ‘academy’ in the history of Western art often evoked a sense of a higher order of aspirations of its members and an elevated level of apprentissage for students. Along with these qualities came the academic disconnectedness with more experimental, living forms of artistic knowledge, which caused the criticism of academies, particularly of the artistic academies, which were directly managed by states. In France of the Ancien Régime, the foundation of artistic academies corresponded almost directly with the formation of the nation-state and the consolidation of the early-modern state ideological apparatus. Consequently, the academies of belles-lettres, painting, and sculpture, and later of architecture, dance, and music became artistic corporations placed in direct service to the state. The strain of being a professional corporation for practitioners, while serving the state and functioning as a modern institution for the liberal arts, marked the development of many of these experimental formations. The tasks they were called upon to accomplish were more than ambitious, such as the distillation of French as a modern language for the Académie Française, or a glorification for history of the still living king for the Académie de peinture et sculpture. The progress of these ambitious assignments was reported directly to the highest officials in the state, such as Cardinal Richelieu, or Minister Colbert, for example. The grandeur of these tasks, often incompatible with the immediate artistic sensitivities and interests, factored into the production of the institutional mythologies and furthered the resistance to them.

In contrast to the Académie francaise, the Académie of painters and sculptors (to which engravers were added later) functioned as a pedagogical site, where generations of artists had to be trained in the spirit and manner of their mentors (the reversed order, however, prevailed in reality). The pedagogical mission stood at the heart of the succession of formal and conceptual principles propagated by the institution, which were consolidated under the title of ‘academic doctrine’. This doctrine, however, was not meant to be what it eventually became in later histories of the Académie, namely, a non-negotiable set of rules, but it emerged as a fluid systematisation of precepts from the exemplary works of art from the past, which were distilled in the daily studio practice. The collation of precepts into theory, which were at once pedagogical tools and the criteria of judgement for the art produced by the students, became one of the missions of the Académie. Academic theory, as Michel’s book ably demonstrates, was more of a pragmatic than an idealistic move on the part of the Académie. As a distinctly modern institution, it strove to build up its own tradition and identity, which was supposed to serve efficiently towards the advancement of the modern state in the making. Michel thus sees the ‘classical ideal’ as an engine for a productive dialectic, one that established standards of quality and secured the leading position of French artists in Europe, but did not infringe on the artists’ freedoms to apply them in accordance with their individual talents.

The centrality of the Académie for art production and discourses of the Ancien Régime in France is an uncontestable fact, and its role has been far from neglected by art historian of several periods. What, then, necessitated the writing of a longue durée history of the institution? Michel’s book on the Académie, as he states in his succinct and forthright preliminary chapter, seeks to restore the complexities of its history, which had been lost in previous accounts that were often too one-sided or generalised. Michel omits naming any of his recent predecessors, who essayed the study of the Académie, leaving it up to the readers to fill the gap, but summarises their efforts as a failure to find a median between two opposite poles of its reception. He tries to debunk these two poles in his interpretation: on the one hand, the assessment of the Académie as a model, and somewhat generic artistic corporation for many ensuing modern artistic academies, whatever flaws its initial structure might have possessed, and, on the other hand, its consideration as a conservative artistic body that monopolised state commissions and the public through a strictly controlled system of admissions, prizes, and exhibitions. Michel’s aspiration is to present the history of the institution with no bias or preconception as to its outcome, to write it as it shines through the documents, which are, however, only partially preserved, as well as to demonstrate the Académie’s objective role in the development of French art from the Regency of Anne of Austria to the Convention. The author believes in the efficacy of the ‘art-historical’ approach to his subject, without identifying at any point what may constitute it, and he declines any methodological borrowing from other disciplines. One of the Michel’s essential tools, at least explicitly, is his reading of the extant documents and their presumably impartial explanation (not even an interpretation, as he maintains) in relation to the variety of artistic production from the period. This close reading of primary sources, unobstructed by ideologies of methods as we are told, brings to the reader’s attention the true engine of the Académie, which resides in its cumulative artistic commitment (or volonté, as Michel terms it) to the production of art of high quality. This commitment ultimately put France ahead of other contemporary visual formations in Europe. While recognising that this effort matched certain political aspirations of the French absolutism, Michel seeks to underscore how much this obvious correspondence did not influence the artists’ search for perfection. A close reading of the texts, Michel claims further, is a reliable means of elucidating the relationship between theory and artistic practice, which produced a fluid variety of artistic forms and not just a homogeneous body of work corresponding to a nullified category of ‘academic’ style.

The book’s subtitle – La Naissance de l’école française (The Birth of the French School) – points more directly to the main thrust in Michel’s book. It also clarifies his preference for an ‘unspoiled’ art-historical method, which presumably sidesteps sociological or political complexities of the institutional formation but distills a distinct teleology of the birth of the national school. To an extent, Michel’s staging of the institution’s difficult years of
growth, the passage through the stages of maturity, and its almost violent death (a closure by historical forces external to the logic of the institution, in the author's view) re-enacts the familiar trope of biography as a genre, while relying on another sort of archetypal Vasarian narrative, in which one school prevails over others through competition.

Michel's affirmative approach to the Académie as the cradle of national tradition resembles the earlier protocols for making a national art history, for example, that of Louis Dimier (1865–1943). The acclaimed scholar of the French Renaissance formulated his notion of a national school as 'a teaching body accepted by all and practiced to perfection, in accordance with tastes and necessities of the period' in relation to the nineteenth-century Académie. In his turn, Michel considers the advent of academic pedagogy less as an historically contingent mechanism for the making of the modern artist in principle, but mostly as a vehicle for assuring France's cultural ascension in Europe. According to this model, it was the collective effort of the school more than the appearance of a few natural geniuses, such as in the Vasarian system, which secured the innate ability of French art, predominantly painting, to progress in isolation from – or even despite – the existing political structures. In Michel's account, a steady evolution of the national school is not indebted to a few exceptional artists (neither Poussin nor LeBrun occupied very much of the author's attention in his account of the seventeenth-century Académie, for example,) but is a product of a collective pedagogical effort and of the system of distinctions furnished by practice. This unfailing, pragmatic teaching system concentrated in drawing from living models and classical examples, emulation of the canonical works from the past, and a slow, thoughtfully managed process of graduation through the preparation of the morceaux de réception led the Académie to the position of the arbiter of taste in European art.

The first part of Michel's book, rendered in four chapters, aims at refreshing, if not questioning, the established narrative of the institution's development. Michel enriches the established chronology of the Académie with particularly detailed accounts of the formation of its administrative apparatus. Despite his initial claim to exercise a strict art-historical method, he savours the prolonged moments of microhistory and sociology of the institution's administration, outlining the peculiar economy of the institution's governance. Michel identifies various, often shifting, models of governance in the history of the institution, thus destabilising the idea of its consistently monolithic system of power. The first part of Michel's book also highlights the importance of legislation in and for the institution's existence. The statutes of the Académie, redrawn in 1655, 1663, 1751, and 1777, respectively, mark the stages in institutional self-regulation in accordance with the changing system of patronage and protection. In principle, these changes should have effectively protected a collective body from the 'despotism' of one particular artist and the submissiveness of others, as Michel outlines in his chapter dedicated to the Académie of Colbert and LeBrun. In reality, however, the newer statutes often sought to reverse the earlier freedoms, such as the statutes of 1663 that overturned the rotation of professors in charge of the institutional administration from the earlier statutes towards the lifetime position of rectors and professors.

Michel's detailed reconstruction of the transition of power between the institution's administrators delegated by the king, from Antoine de Ratabon to Jean-Baptiste Colbert and the Marquis de Louvois, or a silent uprising between artist-administrators, such as Charles LeBrun and Charles Errard, or the politics of a 'velvet opposition', as in the case of Pierre Mignard, among others, engage with the complexities involved in the formation of the collective consciousness and the institutional identity. These complexities, however, rarely spill over into the analysis of paintings and sculptures characteristic of these periods. This disconnection can be explained by Michel's opposition to the blanket idea that any artist associated with the Académie would become a transparent executor of the political goals of the absolute monarchy or institutional administration. Even in the eighteenth century, when amateurs effectively became mediators between the institution and the changing taste of the public, the artistic climate in the Académie, in Michel's account, was defined by the aesthetic choices of their royal administrators to a greater degree than by those of reigning monarchs or the burgeoning public. The institution's bad administrators become the obvious culprits in the system's occasional malfunctioning rather than the contingency of making art based on a certain model. It was not the mythologised despotism of LeBrun, for example, but the pragmatic autocracy of Jules Hardouin-Mansart, the only artist who rose to the rank of protector in 1699–1708, which put the institution into a state of extreme servility to the interests of the state, as Michel suggests. And such a conclusion strikes one as even more perplexing in the light of progressive changes that the institution underwent during Mansart's leadership, for example, the admission of painters of different genres, the further advancement of sculpture as an autonomous discipline in the system of the arts, and the experience of organising the first public exhibitions of academic artists.

Accordingly, Michel's book reconstructs the history of the Académie in four periods, conforming largely to the types of its administration. The first, from the establishment of the institution to the reforms of LeBrun and Colbert, corresponds to the ascension of the liberal arts. The second, starting with Colbert's reforms of 1664 and ending in 1737 with the re-establishment of the Salon, constructs the crucial pillars of academic apparatus: the system of admission and self-governance, professional merits, such as admissions, awards, and places in exhibitions along with the crystallisation of its theoretical discourses, such as the conférences. By inserting this period into a longer sequence, Michel removes the institutional history from the familiar module of the grand siècle of Louis XIV and the art of this period as a blueprint of absolutist propaganda. Such chronological division brings together the vigorous Académie at the time of Colbert and LeBrun with its more lethargic periods under the protectors such as Louvois or the Duc d'Antin. Certain emblematic cases from this extended period, such as Antoine Watteau's admission to the Académie in 1712, become less the instantiation of the crisis of history painting as a genre indicative of a rupture in
institutional history, but rather an example of the school's flexibility in reconfiguring its demands in accordance with the actual artistic practice. The third period, between 1737 and 1774, constitutes the maturity of the institution, during which it begins to feel the burden of its own history, while its already voluble critics started casting a nostalgic gaze backward, to the Académie's more flourishing years. During the long reign of Louis XV, the Académie meets its real public, comes across its critics, and listens to the ideas of its lay supporters in the guise of amateurs. This encounter irrevocably threatens to change the conditions of its existence. At this point, the Académie, in Michel's account, functions again as a self-adjustable mechanism that absorbs the best artists and engulfs all other critical discourses, when it could not keep full control over them. The dialectics of the eighteenth-century Académie's relationship with its public and the complexities of its internal discourses over the crucial matters of aesthetic values, which were thrown into relief in Thomas Crow's Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris and, more recently, in Charlotte Guichard's Les Amateurs d'art à Paris au XVIIIe siècle, are acknowledged in Michel's account more as the matters intrinsic to the institution's development rather than questions posed to the Académie from the external world.\textsuperscript{4}

The last period of this institutional history, from 1777 to 1793, reflects the particularly intense pre-revolutionary resistance to change demonstrated by the Académie's governing tandem, that of the Comte d'Angiviller, Director of Royal Buildings, and Jean-Baptiste Marie Pierre, First Painter to the King. Challenged by fears of being eclipsed by the rising European academies of painting, while confronting, at the same time, the rapidly growing public discontent with modes of art production at home, the institution sought to restore its vigour and relevance by hardening its conservative line. Here again, Michel believes that he can help the reader recover the 'internal logic' of the institution's modus operandi, which remained committed to the consistency and continuity of the school, despite the historical ground collapsing under its structures.

The question that begs to be asked by the reader at this point is what mechanism sustained the national school over such a long period of progress? Michel addresses these questions in the second part of the book, in which the issues of the system of admission, training, exhibitions, ceremonies, and, last but not the least, its theoretical discourses are treated in detail.

Michel's analysis of pedagogy forged and fostered in the Académie is a particularly compelling aspect of the book. A descendant of the Cartesian age, the Académie immediately announced itself as a site for rational and progressive teaching methods, those that should have synthesised the experience of the past academies for the benefit of its sole modern successor. It is not that the French Académie created a new theoretical model for 'the classical ideal', concedes Michel, but the means to achieve it. Abraham Bosse, one of the Académie's early instructors on perspective, was more earnest than hyperbolic when, in 1649, he promised the king and his fellow artists that the Académie would be able to produce 'many Raphaels', should the institution equip itself with a rational and scientific method of teaching. If the content of Bosse's teaching method was rejected expediently, the thrust of his promise to create a rational and competitive training system for French artists was retained in the Académie's agenda for years after. After the foundation of the Académie, painting and sculpture became professions privileged by the state in France.

Tomas Macsotay's The Profession of Sculpture in the Paris Académie complements Michel's book remarkably well. Macsotay's book is dedicated solely to sculptural practices in the Académie in the middle of the eighteenth century, the moment when sculpture moved to the centre of public concerns about art. It also scrutinises some particular aspects of its teaching system that are highlighted in Michel's book predominantly in relation to painting. Macsotay selects four leading sculptors from the 1750s – Jacques Saly, Louis-Claude Vassé, Nicolas-Sébastien Adam, Gabriel-Christophe Allegrain, and Etienne-Maurice Falconet – to show the change in the formal requirements, themes, and forms of display for reception pieces (or morceaux de réception) led by this group of sculptors. The shift from the relief format of the reception piece to three-dimensional objects put the emphasis on the material specificity of sculpture and advanced its autonomy in the academic system.

Macsotay's methodological framework is different from that of Michel's study. Focusing on the production of sculptural objects during the studies in the Académie, Macsotay addresses the critical formative aspects of sculptors as a professional group within the Académie. He not only relies on the institutionally produced texts and official records, as does Michel's study, but also seeks his evidence in imputed or imaginary discourses occurring in the sculptural studio and during the review procedures. Macsotay argues that the change in formal requirements for the reception pieces modulated sculptural pedagogy and recalibrated aesthetic attitudes towards the objects exhibited in the Salons, unforeseen by the existing academic protocols. Macsotay's search for the oral component of sculptural practice, such as utterances and discussions occurring during the selection of candidates for entries, contributes to a particularly challenging and innovative aspect of the book. He justly suggests that these discourses could have achieved particularly resonant effects in situations in which sculptors' identities were legitimised, such as admissions to the exposition, candidacies for prizes, reviews of submissions, among other daily pedagogical procedures, where the verbalisation of opinions inducted students into their professional life. The Académie's daily pedagogy was not only about correcting the students in the studio but also about explaining what these demonstrations meant to achieve, thus making teaching a more intellectually provocative and social task, one that inevitably linked visual priorities with critical language.

With its focus on critical attitudes emerging at the intersection of the materiality of sculpture and modes of seeing and discussing it, Macsotay's study expands on Michael Baxandall's research on the artistic process as a locus of material concerns, formal requirements, and esthetic sensations. Macsotay's zooming in on the artistic studio with its laboratory, experimental atmosphere and a charged, competitive microcosm of characters...
recalls the study of Jacques-Louis David’s studio painter so powerfully developed in Thomas Crow’s Emulation. The engaged discourses around the art objects – drawings, models, and finished exhibition pieces – inherently tinged by the generational differences, as Macsotay argues, produced the language of artistic equanimity and encouraged the practice of sociability, this ultimately securing the bonds between the members of a given professional group. Macsotay’s search for the tangible aesthetic, social, and civic values intrinsic to the process of art-making delivers a new component to the expanding field of the studies of eighteenth-century sculpture.

To gain a full vantage point of the multidimensional approach to the Académie offered by the two studies, one can compare, for example, how Michel and Macsotay discuss the key elements of the academic system, such as morceaux de réception, the issues of repetition and emulation, and the integration of the classical ideal into the currents of visual language. The morceau de réception, a qualifying piece of art, was a rite of passage, opening to graduating artists a door to academic distinctions. The two key chapters in Macsotay’s book – ‘Sculptors’ morceaux between style and method’ and ‘From shop floor to the academic gallery’ – meticulously take the reader through the multilayered procedures of nominations, preparations, submissions, and their intermediary stages (the morceau d’agrément, for example, preceded an actual morceau de réception in the Académie after 1700) and expositions of the grand-scale works in the material or full-size sketches in plaster. The sequence and logistics of these procedures, which has never to my knowledge been examined in art-historical literature before to this extent, demonstrate how a morceau as an object, which had to conform to certain regulatory specifications of theme, scale, format, and material, becomes a morceau as an exemplification of fluctuating aesthetic norms. This long trajectory of a sculptured object from the studio to the academic gallery – all yet hidden from the public eye – was accompanied, as Macsotay demonstrates, by viewing and judging, expressed in progressively emerging discourses. The ‘documentary silence’ for the majority of these essential discourses runs counter, as Macsotay astutely points out, to the practice of the collective interrogation of the objects for establishing the rules or principles for making them, which Colbert projected by means of the conférences in 1666, and to which Roger de Piles alluded in his inaugural conférence in the Académie entitled De la nécessité d’établir des principes et de moyens d’y parvenir in 1699.

The wealth of materials in these chapters leads the reader to question the Académie’s unresolvable conflict between its self-designated status as a distiller of a national canon through the pedagogy of the visual exemplum and the ultimate necessity to resort to discursive forms of knowledge to maintain such a canon, namely, to critical speaking and writing about art. The latter component was proctored by the appointed administrators, such as minister Colbert, or introduced to the institution by its non-professional associates, such as amateurs or critics in the eighteenth century. As a community of shared professional practices, the Académie could not progress sufficiently without the language-based forms of knowledge, which brought to its autonomous milieu a critical language with its inevitably social aspect. In the chapters of his book located in Paris, Macsotay is often overwhelmed by the textures and layers of his material to the degree that it prevents him from interrogating his evidence in depth. How, for example, did the appearance of a livret, a description accompanying the viewing of the pieces submitted to the jury, in 1715 correspond with the examples of critical writing on art appearing around the same period, most notably, Abbé du Bos’s Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture, 1719, or to the growing practice of publishing descriptions of art collections. Do the printed aids identifying the subject matter of sculptured objects testify to the democratisation and secularisation of knowledge in pre-Enlightenment France or to the decrease in value of allegorical codes, so prevalent in the seventeenth-century Académie? Did sculpture borrow or alter the narrative codes operating in painting and was there any cross-influence between the two arts?

For Michel, the tradition of the morceaux de réception proceeds from the evolution of professional judgement and is firmly embedded in the institutional system of distinctions. The morceaux de receptions, executed through a slow, contemplative process with no pressures from the outside market, illustrated the cumulative values of the French school. Solely, the artistic quality determined the acceptability of the artist to the institution, which made content and genre of the presented piece – be it a history painting, a portrait, or a new surrogate, ‘la fête galante’ – less significant for the results. Despite a certain number of failed admissions or rejections, as in the case of Greuze or of the Italian artist Julien de Parme, which Michel considers at some length, the Académie emphatically sought the confirmation of its defining principles in the artists who were capable of sustaining and expanding the canon. History painting, a universal academic genre, allowed the true talents to shine the most, according to this logic. In this implicit subscription to a certain aesthetic ideology, the morceau de réception withstood both the pressures of the institution’s royal patrons (their interests, as Michel proposes, should have been accepted a priori) and the caprices of public taste. When Denis Diderot, one of the most acrimonious art critics of the period, who is almost invisible in Michel’s chapters dedicated to the eighteenth-century Académie, decried the malfunctioning of the institution’s barometer of perfection, he tailored his opinion to public taste, another form of ideology, which the Académie rightly resisted, as Michel proposes. This particular form of resistance insured the development of professional ‘savoir faire’, the only true criterion of judgement for academic artists, from the rhetorical and often passionate intervention of the non-artists, such as amateurs or public intellectuals. Influential theorists or leaned amateurs, such as Roger de Piles or the Comte de Caylus, to mention just a few of these, could suggest certain ideas to the institution, but could not have swayed the artists’ opinion on the crucial matters of execution. When the rest of Europe was transfixed by the rediscovery of antiquities culminating in the archeological excavations and writing of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, French academic artists remained immune to this new, enticing knowledge, in Michel’s account. The Winckelmannian ideal, which the students of Jacques-Louis David embraced later, as Michel suggests, had no appeal for the French school prior to...
1793, as it had already developed the classical male nude as a staple of its vocabulary since the moment of its inception.

Michel's belief in the exceptional position of the French school in European art might be seen as being consistent with its isolation, as foreigners rarely became students in the institution. Aspiring French nationals could only have studied academic method in Paris, as the Académie thwarted the creation of art schools in the French provinces. By this means, the Académie ensured that its singular pedagogy did not spread through local academies in order to preserve its principles from simplification or vulgarisation. This politics of aesthetic protectionism, as Michel agrees, confirmed the mission of the Académie and had a positive effect on the national school, as it saved French art from the decline experienced by other art schools in Europe. At this point, the reader might become concerned about the categories of progress and decline used by the author in a somewhat absolute, unmitigated way, unless one decodes them in terms of a Hegelian aesthetic.

Among the means that secured the steady progress of the Académie, Michel particularly highlights the systematic training in drawing after the living model and after canonical examples (the balance between the two was to be varied at different periods, as he acknowledges) and the practice of emulation, which perpetuated the institution's drive to perfection. The question of emulation places Michel's book in a productive dialogue with Macsotay's study, as both authors identify emulation as a crucial creative engine of the institution but view it differently. Michel proposes that being a student in the Académie disciplined (or one may say 'limited') a future artist's self-positioning in the tradition: repetition of its best examples validated the national school's exemplary status. Michel underscores that the occasional mechanical repetition of the prototypes in the context of the Académie was not the same as a mechanical repetition of pre-existing formulae performed in a workshop environment. The difference was based on the continuity of high art versus the temporality of the métier with the former secured by a particular 'savoir faire' that was transmittable only within the school. Even if the migration of the same themes and figures from one morceau de réception to another afflicted the academic production at certain moments bringing it close to the mechanical repetition in a workshop, the progress of the school was somewhat inevitable as its artistic cuisine was always based on clean, healthy ingredients. In Michel's view, the highly competitive environment in the school drove students to overcome their predecessors and to surpass their peers in search of distinction and high-profile commissions. The singular ambience of the Académie made Paris into the incontestable centre of gravity for the best artists. The second-tier artists, those who could excel under pressures (Michel concedes that the Académie produced many of those as well), tried to search teaching positions and commissions in provinces or in the artistically 'less developed' European countries, where they quickly ascended to dominating positions due to their academic pedigree casting a somewhat compromising light on the top quality artists produced in the Académie. In contrast, Macsotay's book presents emulation's brighter side by seeing in it the quest for perfection shared by students and a platform for equanimity, as he highlights emulation's egalitarian possibilities. Neither of the two books, however, suggests a new theoretical approach to the model of institutional emulation created in the French Académie.

Artists in training had to struggle for distinctions not only among themselves but also with two competing imperatives for their progress – that of nature, represented by a living model, and the rules of art, systematised by the canon, as Michel sees no other external factors in the academic pedagogy. How might the rules of nature enter the academic debates by means other than being mediated by the already edified institutionally system of genres is not considered by Michel. He concedes, rather, that the question of vraisemblance, unlike the ut picture poesis that he dismisses as irrelevant to the actual practice of painting in post-Renaissance France, was paramount to both art and literary theory of the classical age. Vraisemblance, a sort of a house rule category, was unavoidable in the Académie's classroom pedagogy and in its discourses over reception procedures, particularly as the eighteenth century progressed, but its correlation with the shifting esthetics of perception and the democratisation of knowledge seemed beyond concerns for the institution. The Académie's technical knowledge of how to make a perfect painting or sculpture could not sufficiently persuade the public, who learned to be engaged with and by the art produced by the nation's top institution on many levels and more often on their own terms. Not surprising then, that the term 'academism', designating an art that obeys the rules rather than a living aesthetics, was coined in the late 1770s, during the decade preceding the main historical cataclysm in France's history.

In the second part of his book, Macsotay takes his reader from the Académie's headquarters in Paris to Rome, where the most promising students gained a chance to perfect their skills in the coveted setting of the 'living' tradition of classical art. Scrutinising the daily rituals and activities in the Palazzo Mancini in Rome, the home to the French Académie in Rome since 1725, Macsotay portrays the milieu as a particular form of modern collectivity, in which pensionnaires became members of a séminaire, as it was called by the Duc d'Antin. This identification by the Académie's protector of a learning mode explains how the practice of drawing among a group of peers in Rome intensified students' individual and collective experiences against the universal value of classical art and imprinted a 'shared' and 'collective' consciousness into their emerging artistic identities. In his seminal essay 'To the seminar', Roland Barthes likened the learning space of a seminar to a suspended garden, or 'a partial utopia', where the collectivity is at peace in a world at war. This utopia of learning, in which all costs were paid by the state, was indeed a dream for many academic students. In Macsotay's persuasive account, the experiences of seeing, drawing, even praying together (compulsory in the Papal Rome) coalesced into a distinct artistic practice, particularly under the sage guidance of Nicolas Vleughels, Director of the French Académie in Rome between 1724 and 1737. The Roman site necessitated the use of portable materials: drawings on paper, assembled in carnets or separate sheets, plaster copies, on the one hand, and letters and diaries, on the other. Macsotay examines this predominantly page-based evidence
as a testimony to another aspect of professionalisation, in which sculptors relinquished their medium specificity for the sake of the commonality of experience. However repetitious these experiences were, they honed young artists’ sensibilities to the world outside their Parisian incubator and furthered the sense of sculpture’s sociability of among other liberal arts, along with the actual sociability of individual students within the group.

That this growing sensibility towards essentially sculptural forms resulted in Étienne-Maurice Falconet’s Milo of Croton, the unconventional morceau de réception of 1750 is symptomatic for Macsotay’s. He concludes his book with this case study to underscore how Falconet’s aspiration to represent a dynamic overflow of movement conveyed in marble, the classical material of harmony, paralleled the emergence of new sculptural aesthetic among artists at a pivotal moment in the Académie’s encounter with its more demanding public of the Enlightenment.

Stepping back to gain a combined picture of the Académie de peinture et de sculpture that both books present, the reader may choose his/her preference of the genre – that of an epic, such as in Michel’s, or a group portrait, such as in Macsotay’s. A certain mythic component, however, seems inescapable in both books as much as both attempt to confront or dismantle the existing myths of the institution’s history. In Michel’s account, it is a shadow of Hegelian free will, or la volonté, of the institution, which leads the Académie towards the teleological progress of national art. Notably, the idea of the school here substitutes an individual genius in Hegel’s aesthetics, while the author of his history gains insights into the immanent meaning of facts and texts. Michel’s Académie is an institution which concerned itself primarily with the production of art and which carried on its affairs with a superstructure of the governing ideological model remains central. Should this concept of the school be an inevitable consequence of thinking of art-historically, asked Jean-Claude Lebensztejn in his Annexes almost two decades ago? By configuring a community of artists into a school, art historians do not simply play with words, but essentially establish borders and categories to reaffirm a correlation between a certain school of thinking of today and historic objects of their interpretation. For Lebensztejn, the categorisation by schools is at once a method and a form of academic economy, in which ‘a given culture pays money and praises people issuing from it, so that they preserve it from the ruination, which it feels imminent, as they affirm the insurance that this culture would illusorily provide to itself’.

One of the possible solutions to the disciplinary obsession with artistic schools as hinges of historical interpretations comes from Jacques Rancière’s recent study of the regimes of art, a category which offers a more flexible structure for relocating those longue durée events, such as what happened in the French Académie, by means of historicising its intrinsic factors but at the same time of de-historicising the conditions of their reception. Rancière applies the category of the aesthetic regime to modernity, where it appears as ‘a system of possibilities that is historically constituted but does not abolish the representative regime, which was previously dominant. At a given point in time, several regimes coexist and intermingle in the works themselves’. Michel’s and Macsotay’s books launch a broader argument for reconsidering the art-historical meaning of the Académie that might be articulated with Rancière’s notion of the regimes of art and especially the aesthetic regime of modernity. At its best moments, the Académie did not envision itself as a product of a transitory classical age, but aspired to be a beacon of its perpetual modernity.

Notes
1. It is important to note that the current book constitutes a kind of sequel to the publication of the conférences edited by Michel and Jacqueline Lichtenstein, Conférences de l’Académie royale de Peinture et de Sculpture (Paris: Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 2006–2015), 8 vols.
2. Michel did not mention Dimier in his brief review of the historiography of the Académie, which inexplicably ends at the beginning of the twentieth century.


7. Michel, L’Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, 337.


9. Michel, L’Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, 228.

10. Michel, L’Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, 342.


12. La vérité ne fait les choses que comme elles sont, et la vraisemblance les fait comme elles doivent être. La vérité est presque toujours défectueuse, par la mélange des conditions singulières qui la composent. Il ne nait rien au monde qui ne s’éloigne de la perfection de son idée en y naissant. Il faut chercher des originaux et des modèles dans la vraisemblance et dans les principes universels des choses où il n’entre rien de matériel et de singulier qui les corrompe’. Père Rapin, Réflexions sur la Poétique in his Oeuvres, vol. II (Amsterdam: Pierre Mortier, 1709), pp. 115 – 16.


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In Plain Sight

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On the evening of 17 October 1961, between twenty and thirty thousand Algerians, at the time still juridically French citizens, converged in the centre of Paris in peaceful demonstrations called by the metropolitan organising committee of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), the leading Algerian rebel group. It was the largest demonstration of Algerian natives ever held in metropolitan France, designed to protest a curfew put in place by the Paris Police Prefect, Maurice Papon. The police responded with unprovoked savagery, and between one hundred and two hundred demonstrators were killed; because many of their bodies were thrown into the Seine, a complete tally will probably never be known. In recent years, journalists and historians of France have devoted considerable energy to researching and recounting these events and their subsequent erasure as part of a larger historical reckoning of state-organised and state-sanctioned atrocities in the period of the French-Algerian War. 1 Hannah Feldman joins their company with a chapter devoted to photographs of the demonstrations and their aftermath. 17 October 1961 also figures in The Myth of Nouveau Réalisme, in a way that makes clear the different preoccupations of the two authors. In 1962, a booklet called Topographie anecdotée du hasard, which served as an invitation to the first solo exhibition of the artist Daniel Spoerri, described on its first page a work that might or might not exist, comprised, like his physical tableaux-pièges or snare paintings, of the detritus of everyday life fixed (that is literally glued on a fiat surface) at a precise moment. The moment of the verbalised work Spoerri called Object 1: 17 October 1961, 3:47 p.m. In her lengthy discussion of the Topographie, Kaira Cabañas attaches no importance to the date beyond Spoerri’s use of it (indeed, later in the chapter, it is the time, not the date, that indexes the virtual object); a reader unacquainted with French history would have no idea that the date had any other significance.

Although this contrast points to larger differences, the books under review have much in common. The two authors share an interest in the ways art and language produce or constitute the phenomena they treat, and both understand their objects of study as deeply imbricated with contemporary politics (though their conceptions of politics are not identical). Both examine a wide range of cultural productions, including printed texts, installation art, photography, and film, as well as painting in Cabañas and urban design in Feldman. Neither is concerned with artistic movements as conventionally understood: Cabañas focuses much more on the dynamics of her subtitle, ‘art and the performative’, than on nouveau réalisme, the artificiality of which she concedes in the first few pages. Though she devotes her first chapter to the critic Pierre Restany, who invented the term nouveau réalisme in 1960, her primary purpose is to expose the peculiarity of what she calls his ‘paradoxical realism’ (p. 24) by showing its connections to the ‘fantastic realism’ of Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier. Feldman, for her part, barely mentions new realism and devotes only a few paragraphs to Restany, whose critical agenda is tangential to her argument. Cabañas and Feldman more or less agree on the oddity and obtuseness of Restany’s defence of the décollages of Raymond Hains and Jacques Villeglé, to which each devotes a chapter. Each seeks to move beyond previous debates between those who have seen these torn and lacerated posters mounted on canvas either as primarily concerned with the conditions of avant-garde art-making or as bound up in contemporary political debates, but not both. Their revisionist impulses also coincide with respect to one body of theory that informs their quite distinct approaches: both seek fresh insights in the writings of Guy Debord, including those from before the creation of the Situationist International. In Feldman’s case, this...