

## FROM 'UNITÉ DE SUJET' TO 'UNITÉ D'INTÉRÊT'

### A CENTURY OF WORD AND IMAGE RELATIONS IN FRANCE

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#### *Introduction*

French seventeenth-century art theorists were still fond of the *ut pictura poesis* theory, while eighteenth-century theorists increasingly thought that it could be dispensed with. In this paper it will become clear that political changes and the changing group ideologies to which art theorists and art critics adhered, were responsible for this development. The seventeenth-century concept of 'unité de sujet' was coined within a circle of aristocrats and intellectuals, who were unquestioningly adherent to the king. They created a theory of art that was almost exclusively based on the most influential work of literary theory of all times, Aristotle's *Poetics*, on Horace's *ut pictura poesis* and on a strict hierarchy of painterly and literary genres.

'Unité d'intérêt', on the other hand, was a term preferred among eighteenth-century art critics, who challenged the privileges of the French court nobility and those of state-protected institutions like the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. They wished for a society where every citizen adhered to the interests of society as a whole, ordered like nature, where all creatures were completely interdependent. Diderot in particular believed that the composition of paintings was not a mirror of literary compositional principles but of the order of nature. By now history painting had come to be considered the example for dramatic poetry, while the seventeenth-century interpretation of *ut pictura poesis* had been that, inversely, dramatic poetry was the example for history painting.

#### *The Modernes and 'unité de sujet'*

In order to trace the remarkable development from 'unité de sujet' to 'unité d'intérêt', the debates going on in the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris during the seventeenth century will serve as a point of departure. This Academy had been founded in 1648, after the example of the Académie Française (1639) and the Italian academies of art. The artists

attached to the court felt the need to unite themselves in an Academy and to break the power of the Saint Luke's guild. Only in this way could they be freed from the taint of being mere artisans, and strive for a higher social status.<sup>1</sup> Although the Academy sought royal protection from the beginning, it began to bloom only after 1663 when it became a state-regulated institution to serve Colbert's pro-Louis XIV propaganda machine. Now the amalgam of art theories taken over from Renaissance Italy and studied by the members of the Academy to enhance the theoretical foundation of their art, did not satisfy anymore.<sup>2</sup>

Several art theorists were appointed by Colbert to the Academy with the task to create an official Academic doctrine. The most important of these were André Félibien (1619-1695), historiographer of the Academy, and Charles Le Brun, Premier Peintre du Roi (1619-1690). Le Brun in particular was instrumental in making the Academy a fortress of the *Modernes* in the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, a long existing debate that now reached a new phase.<sup>3</sup> Félibien's intellectual development showed less consistency; he gradually began to question the Academy's authority and to show more independence of judgement.<sup>4</sup> The *Modernes* were intent on proving the superiority of French contemporary art, literature and science and in this way also of the France of Louis XIV in general, as compared to earlier periods. For this reason Félibien and Le Brun 'reinvented' art theory. They based their work on that of the *Modernes* within the Académie Française, who developed a theory of literature and art that was a modernised and supposedly improved version of the work of a very limited number of classical authors, mainly Aristotle and Horace. As a result of the exertions of the *Modernes*, French art theory began to show a marked literary bias. Precisely this literary bias caused the emergence of new insights concerning the nature and unique qualities of painting.

Except for Leonardo da Vinci, who had considered perspective to be the binding element of the entire composition of a painting, Italian art theorists had cherished the idea that the composition of a painting was in fact the sum of the compositions of the bodies of the individual figures shown. A history painting showed an action, so it should be clear what the individ-

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<sup>1</sup> That social aspirations formed the main reason for both the foundation of the Academy and the accompanying plea for royal protection is made clear by Weyl, *Pas-sion*, pp. 205-210.

<sup>2</sup> For the art-theoretical consequences of the new role of the Academy in royal propaganda, see Germer, *Kunst – Macht – Diskurs*.

<sup>3</sup> Fumaroli, 'Les abeilles', p. 199.

<sup>4</sup> See Germer, *Kunst – Macht – Diskurs*, pp. 388-397.

ual figures' part in the action was and how they interacted. This idea of composition did not have much in common with 'Moderne' art theory, which assumed that the composition was invented as a whole in the painter's mind.<sup>5</sup>

In Renaissance Italy, painting and art theory had been concerned with monumental religious and secular art. Life-sized representations of saints and figures of worldly authority seemed to merge with the viewers' reality. Although French seventeenth-century artists still practised monumental wall- and ceiling painting, contemporary art theory was more concerned with the small-sized 'tableau', the easel painting that showed the viewer a scene that was clearly separated from his own world. Poussin, together with Raphael the great example for painters belonging to the Academy, was believed to have perfected these small-sized history paintings and to have also been the learned, sophisticated artist who the members of the Academy wished to be.<sup>6</sup>

In the art theory of Félibien, composition was the intellectual invention of the subject, and execution was completely subservient to this. The composition of a history painting was compared with that of a tragedy. Félibien used the term 'unité de sujet' to indicate that the unity of a painting was determined by its intellectual content. History painting should obey the rule of the three unities, of time, place and action, and, where possible, should even indicate the structure of the action as having a beginning, middle and end. It must also follow the dramatic rules of verisimilitude and possibility, and of *convenance* throughout.<sup>7</sup> At the same time it was implicitly acknowledged that the composition of paintings could not be divided into separately conceived parts (i.e. human figures, background), but was conceived as a unity:

... la première (partie) qui traiteroit de la Composition, comprend presque toute la théorie de l'art, à cause que l'opération s'en fait dans l'imagination du Peintre, qui doit avoir *disposé* tout son ouvrage dans son esprit & le posséder parfaitement avant que de venir à l'exécution.<sup>8</sup>

The clearest manifestation of the emergence of this new Aristotelian theory of art was Charles Le Brun's *Conférence* before the Academy (1667) about

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<sup>5</sup> A thorough analysis of the differences between Italian and French theories of composition can be found in Puttfarken, *The discovery*.

<sup>6</sup> Weyl, *Passion*, pp. 80-81, 86.

<sup>7</sup> Puttfarken, *The discovery*, p. 239.

<sup>8</sup> Félibien, *Entretiens*, p. 92.

Poussin's *Gathering of the manna* (1637/38) known to us through Félibien's account (plate 1).<sup>9</sup> His description of the painting began with the composition of the landscape, the air, and the relationships of groups of figures to the background and each other. From these generalities, Le Brun worked down to the description of the individual figures, their attitudes and facial expressions. After this followed the core argument: since a history painter could only depict one moment in an action, he had to combine several incidents so as to make his painting understandable. For this reason Poussin had depicted the falling of the manna as well as the mood before and after this event. Félibien, who recorded both Le Brun's *Conférence* and the discussion following it, ended his account with remarks made by an anonymous speaker (Félibien himself?) that supported Le Brun's opinion. Poussin had adhered strictly to Aristotle's precept that a literary work should have a beginning, a middle and an end, and should be structured around one or more 'péripéties', moments of reversal in the action. In other words, like a tragedy composed according to Aristotle's rules, it formed a self-contained whole.

That France thought its own ideas about art superior to those of Italy also becomes clear from the way in which Raphael's works, *Saint Michael* (1518) for instance, were used as illustrations of the new French ideas on composition.<sup>10</sup> According to Charles Perrault, the best-remembered champion of the *Modernes*, and also a servant of Colbert's propaganda machine, French art had given to the art of painting perspective, clair-obscur and of course composition, while Renaissance Italy had only contributed facial expression. Like science, art was capable of progress.<sup>11</sup>

In Le Brun's theory of expression, the idea of painting as an organic whole was even further developed than in Félibien's art theory. Le Brun introduced the concept of 'expression générale', meaning that every part of a painting, be it colour, drawing, landscape or figural composition, should be expressive of the subject's mood, so as to support intellectual understanding of the subject.<sup>12</sup> Here Le Brun built on Poussin's theory of the *modi*. Although Poussin referred to this theory only once, in a letter to his friend and benefactor Paul Fréart de Chantelou, he was believed to have made the composition and colour of his paintings expressive of the mood of the de-

<sup>9</sup> Félibien, *Entretiens*, 5, pp 400-428.

<sup>10</sup> Puttfarken, *The discovery*, p. 259.

<sup>11</sup> Perrault, *Parallèle*, vol. I, pp. 208, 213.

<sup>12</sup> Le Brun first laid down his ideas about expression in his *Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière* (1668). This conference was published by Bernard Picart in 1698. The Picart edition was reprinted in Montagu, *The expression*.

picted subject.<sup>13</sup> Le Brun honoured the achievement of Renaissance Italy, facial expression, as the second important form of expression in art. He named it 'expression particulière' and subjected it to intellectual regulation. His theory of facial expression was largely based on Descartes's theory of the passions, which was highly rationalised and aimed at restraint in the expression of emotions.

The 'honnête homme', i.e., a man master of himself and of his emotions, loyal to his friends and to his king, was the human ideal of the higher social circles, the *Modernes* in particular, during the earlier part of the reign of Louis XIV.<sup>14</sup> This striving for self-restraint was a reaction to the wars and rebellions that had devastated France during the sixteenth and earlier part of the seventeenth century. That Le Brun defends this ideal proves, firstly, that it was also part of official royal propaganda, and secondly, that he himself, a mere painter, was now a socially high ranking personality, who shared the ideals of his equals. In fact, Le Brun was raised to the nobility as a token of recognition for his services to the monarchy.

Building a theory of expression on rationalistic, scientific insights was again meant as a demonstration of the superiority of modern French culture. Being satisfied with only rudimentary knowledge of the Classics, just enough to understand Aristotle, Horace and their modern interpreters, was also rather typical of the 'honnête homme' mentality. It abhorred excess in everything, in knowledge and religion, as well as in the need for individualism and independent thinking.<sup>15</sup>

History paintings showing a highly hierarchical, self-contained structure, with every figure gracefully taking its proper place, seemingly out of its own free will, strongly appealed to the small circle of 'honnêtes hommes'.<sup>16</sup> Since artists and their public shared the same social and intellectual ideas, creating and understanding a history painting could be seen to be highly similar intellectual exertions. The composition of individual history paintings reflected a social ideal, but also the power, equilibrium and intellectual superiority of the reign of Louis XIV. The life-size 'effigy' of the king, (or of another personage holding worldly power, a saint or a Bibli-

<sup>13</sup> See for instance Körner, *Auf der Suche*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>14</sup> For the coincidence of Modernity and 'honnête homme' ideal during the reign of Louis XIV, see Gillot, *La Querelle*, pp. 323-393.

<sup>15</sup> Weyl, *Passion*, pp. 75, 100-104.

<sup>16</sup> For the composition of history paintings as a mirror of the social order, see Held, *Französische Kunsttheorie*, p. 132.

cal figure) was no longer the most important way in which power and faith were made visible to the viewer, as they had been in Renaissance Italy.<sup>17</sup>

*Roger de Piles and independent artistic judgement*

During the seventeenth century, there were also some dissident voices of men who were far more interested in painting technique than in the intellectual component of art. The most important of these was Roger de Piles (1635-1709), a painter, gentleman of means, and independent connoisseur of the arts, who attacked Félibien and Le Brun's ideas on art right from the beginning of the 1660s. Of the modern painters he admired the lusty, colourful Rubens more than Poussin, the defender of subdued colour and the clear contour line. Indeed, he became one of the main contenders in the conflict between the Poussinistes and the Rubénistes, which raged during the later years of the reign of Louis XIV.

The Rubénistes were irritated by the *Modernes*'s exclusive admiration for Poussin and Raphael, whose work and character (that of Raphael in particular) were seen by the other party as the embodiment of the 'honnête homme' ideal. This admiration did no justice to the technical prowess of other modern artists, and French artistic practice of the later seventeenth century. Even Le Brun, Poussiniste in theory, was everything but a Poussin follower in practice. Rubénistes like De Piles sided with the *Anciens* in the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*. With them they shared a need for independent thinking, and for wide and in-depth research. Rubens was presented as a highly erudite painter and De Piles defended the need for profound knowledge of Renaissance art.<sup>18</sup> Among the *Anciens*, De Piles' good friend Boileau in particular believed that the greatness of the French monarchy and culture consisted of their being part of a great tradition, more than in the superiority of modern France.<sup>19</sup> They performed thorough historical research and analysed the works of Greek playwrights which did not conform to Moderne French ideas on the rational character of Greek tragedy.

During the last years of the seventeenth century, the Rubénistes gradually gathered more influence in French artistic life. The causes for this are many. Colbert, the most astute defender of the Moderne and Poussiniste ideals, had died in 1685, and had no successor with an equal dedication to his ideals. The ideals themselves bore, as we have seen, hardly any relation

<sup>17</sup> For the change from 'effigy' to 'mirror' thinking in Félibien's theories, see Germer, *Kunst – Macht – Diskurs*, pp. 220-230.

<sup>18</sup> Fumaroli, 'Les abeilles', pp. 199-200.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 132-133.

to artistic practice. Le Brun was replaced in official favour by his rival Mignard and the very existence of the Academy was threatened in 1694, when the cost of warfare caused a financial crisis that left no money for continued state protection of the Academy. Saved by only a hairbreadth from closure, the Academy was from then on always aware of its precarious position as a state-protected, privileged institution.

After 1685 court life became less important in the social life of the higher circles. These became bored with the growing austerity and religious intolerance of a court now dominated by the pious Mme de Maintenon. Out of protest they retired from the court, where the 'honnête homme' had thrived, to their large Parisian hotels, where artistic and intellectual life now became centered. New patrons of the arts came to the fore. Besides members of the nobility, rich businessmen and bankers, such as the Crozat family, striving for acceptance in the highest social circles, began to collect art and to gather artists and intellectuals, like De Piles, around them. As the case of Le Brun has already made clear, during the reign of Louis XIV it was possible for commoners to enter into the nobility. Members of the Crozat family, for instance, married into the old noble families Montmorency, Béthune and Broglie.<sup>20</sup>

The Crozats owned a famous collection of Flemish and Dutch paintings. New artistic genres like Watteau's sensuous *Fêtes galantes*, influenced by Rubens' sketchy, colouristic manner, catered for new, more private, artistic needs, and indeed, reflected an artistic ideal that saw an artist more as a highly original and elusive individual than as a servant of king and country. The 'honnête homme' ideal was now transformed by the nobility into one of complete separation from mundane affairs and perfect idleness. The Crozats and their like were hardly attracted to the 'honnête homme' ideal and were, like the artists, individualists who indulged in their personal taste. Many French bankers were Protestants posing as Roman Catholics after the revocation of the Nantes Edict; under a superficial conformism they were open to new ideas. The house of Pierre Crozat in Paris functioned as a kind of shadow Academy, where De Piles, and later on Du Bos, could develop and discuss their art theories.<sup>21</sup>

The artist now had to draw the attention of another individual, with his own, individual taste, to his work, instead of relying on a small fund of ideas shared by the social layer to which he belonged. Roger de Piles's writings reflect this new relation between artists and their public. Not surprisingly, De Piles's interest in artistic genres that mainly wish to please the

<sup>20</sup> See Gossman, *French society*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>21</sup> Weyl, *Passion*, pp. 223-228; Crow, *Painters*, pp. 39-40.

viewer, such as still life, was far greater than that of other seventeenth century theorists; but his ideas about history painting were strikingly different from the concept defended by the Academy, and were only accepted there in much diluted form. This was the case even after De Piles was accepted as a member of the Academy, in 1699, the year that marks the victory of the Rubénistes over the Poussinistes. In this year, a new 'surintendant', Mansart, decided to bring new life into the Academy by focusing the Academic debate more on painting technique, on the lower genres, and on the coloristic painters, so highly popular in France and so completely ignored by Colbert's Academy.<sup>22</sup> That the Academy itself was prepared to adapt to changing tastes, in order to safeguard its existence, becomes clear for instance from its accepting Watteau as a member, in a category all of his own, that of 'peintre des fêtes galantes', in 1717.

Although De Piles did not attack the idea that a history painting should provide food for the mind, and that consequently, the painter's work consisted partly of inventing a subject, his main interest was in another kind of invention, specific to the painter. De Piles no longer regarded the public for history painting as a small group of kindred spirits, but as a larger group of persons who are taken up by their own affairs. He stressed the point that the painter should use his art to draw his public towards his paintings and to hold its attention. In his view, creating and appreciating a painting were fundamentally different activities.

At the beginning of his *Cours de peinture par principes* (1708), he told the anecdote of the man who went to Rome expressly to see Raphael's *Stanze*. When he left the Vatican he still had not seen them and asked his guide where they were. The guide informed the poor art lover that he had walked right past them without noticing them.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the works of Raphael, a revered artist in Academic circles, missed an essential quality. They could perhaps interest a viewer who was already aware of their importance and presence, but they could not draw a viewer towards them.

By opening his book with this anecdote, De Piles pointed out where the painter should look for inspiration: in the art of the orator.<sup>24</sup> The anecdote is a rhetorical opening device to draw the attention of the listener or reader to the orator and his argument, in which he will elaborate the point already made in his opening anecdote. The painter should devise in his mind a gripping overall visual effect, to catch the public's attention and to make the intellectual part of the painting easily understood.

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<sup>22</sup> Duro, *The Academy*, pp. 218-222

<sup>23</sup> De Piles, *Cours*, pp. 14-16.

<sup>24</sup> Puttfarken, *Roger de Piles' theory of art*, p. 58.

For this reason the painting should give an illusion of reality, (just like the anecdote of the Raphael-lover, told with realistic detail), and be seductive by the quality of its drawing (*dessin*), colours (*coloris*) and *clair-obscur*, together forming 'l'oeconomie du tout-ensemble'. It is the execution that gives the first impression of a painting as a self-contained, attractive whole. Execution was in De Piles's view not the lowly work of the hand, completely subservient to the intellectual work of composition, but the purely artificial way in which a painter, like the orator, extracted the desired reaction from his public.<sup>25</sup>

The way in which De Piles intended the grouping of the figures, *clair-obscur*, and degrees of sketchiness to help the viewer's understanding of the painting was certainly not very daring. The protagonist always has the full light; less important figures are either in the shadow or depicted in a more sketchy manner. The really revolutionary part of De Piles's theory was his idea that the visual ordering of paintings must be attractive on its own, separate from the subject. Instead of the 'unité de sujet', which we find in Félibien's theories, he introduced the 'unité d'objet'. This meant that the objects depicted in a painting must be visually ordered in a certain way so as to be taken in by the viewer as a whole, as a logical and visually attractive composition. He developed his own theory of human perception that assumed that coloring and 'clair obscur' would only reach their proper effect when they could be seen to bind a composition to a whole. A painting which showed only dispersed objects would be without 'effet' on the viewer. De Piles stressed that this visual effect must retain the freshness of the painter's first sketch to be fully able to raise the public's attention, must show the painter's 'hand', his spontaneity and enthusiasm, and must overwhelm the viewer by its 'sublimity'. The terms sublime and enthusiasm had been introduced in French art and literary theory by the 'Ancien' Boileau, in his translation of the pseudo Longinus' treatise on the sublime (1674).<sup>26</sup>

### *The Abbé Du Bos and the public for history painting*

The theorist who must count as the leading force in post-Louis XIV art theory was the Abbé Jean-Baptiste Du Bos. In 1719 he published the *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, a book that secured him a place in the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, one of the sister academies of the Académie Française and the Académie Royale de Peinture

<sup>25</sup> Puttfarken, *Roger de Piles' theory of art*, pp. 57-79.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 115-126.

et de Sculpture. Three years later he would even become Secretary of the Académie Française, a lifelong position which gave enormous prestige in cultural matters. As we have seen he belonged to the same intellectual milieu as De Piles; the enormous social and cultural influence of the Crozat family during the regency of the Duke of Orleans probably helped his swift career. The main task that he set himself in his book was to create a compromise between De Piles' extreme theories and the points of view held by the *Modernes*. He successfully reconciled two seemingly opposed theories, enabling the visual to hold its own, while still serving as a support for the intellectual part of history painting. His theory also offered an interpretation of *ut pictura poesis*, which allowed for the fact that tragedy and history painting used highly different means to reach the same goal. With the independence of mind and research defended by the *Anciens*, plus the wisdom of a whole range of Classical authors, Du Bos developed a middle-of-the-road art theory, championing neither Poussin nor Rubens, that would appeal to a wide public during the eighteenth century.<sup>27</sup>

During a stay in London, Du Bos had become interested in Locke's sensualist philosophy. The influence of sensualism in eighteenth-century French philosophy would later become enormous, mostly through the writings of Voltaire and Condorcet. Sensualism taught that sensual perception forms the basis for feeling, reflection and knowing, while seventeenth-century Cartesianism had focused on rational, orderly thought as the basis for knowledge. The core idea held by sensualist thinkers about the role of man in society was that every individual strives for the greatest possible happiness. This happiness can never be found outside a society ordered according to natural law, where, as in nature, all individuals are mutually interdependent. This ideal of mutual interdependence was known as the great chain of being. Artists and writers trying to win over their public to this new social ideal should no longer appeal to a shared sense of duty but make use of the human need for pleasure and happiness. They should also make use of the rapports, the links existing between all natural phenomena, and between these phenomena and human perception. Sensualist philosophy taught that, analogous to the rapports existing in nature, self-interest and the interests of society did not clash, but could be in perfect, natural harmony. We shall see both the terms interest and rapports crop up in the art theories of Du Bos and Diderot.

Sensualist art theories had the potential to bring art to the whole of the populace. Du Bos accepted the idea that the common people were able to appreciate art, while in practice the Parisian circles around the Crozats,

<sup>27</sup> Fumaroli, 'Les abeilles', pp. 212-213.

open to new philosophical directions, remained his real public for art. Du Bos strongly believed that taste, a very individual quality only to be found in the educated classes, was essential for discernment in artistic matters.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, every human being possessed sentiment, and this quality enabled him to be touched by a good work of art.<sup>29</sup>

In Du Bos's theory, the role of history painting in man's life differed greatly from what the *Modernes* wished it to be. Every man starts life as a blank leaf; his development into a good or bad human being is dependent on the good or bad impressions that he undergoes in life. To be able to educate people morally, painters and writers must make use of the human need to drive away boredom with sensual pleasure and spectacles that excite the passions. Du Bos pointed to the almost universal interest in gruesome spectacles like bullfights and executions as proof for his theory. The theatre, 'poésie dramatique' in Du Bos's terminology, as well as history painting, gives an artificial depiction of reality, which is more impressive than reality itself. That is possible because both forms of art choose events that are highly suitable for moving the public. Suffering individuals and suffering humanity in general are their subjects. They imitate the passions of suffering human beings in such a way that everything base and negative is filtered out. The shadows of passions that are created in this way have a huge capacity for moving and educating the public. And indeed, if this process is to work, the painter himself must be highly moved by his subject, imaginative, and able to communicate his own emotions directly to his viewers. But again, in the end it is taste that enables the public to fully appreciate the painter's work and intentions. Du Bos showed himself to be no believer in the way authorities like Le Brun had laid out the rules of art. He stated that an artist of genius (that is to say, someone with a natural talent for his art) *uses* the rules of art to reach his public but is not overly concerned with them, and even less subservient to them.

Du Bos saw tragedy in many respects as a visual form of art. He was far more interested in the facial expressions and gestures that underline declamation than in the text itself. In history painting he considered them to be the most important bearers of expression. Du Bos's answer to the question: which form of art is the most important, painting or poetry, reads as follows. The effect of history painting on its public is more direct than that

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<sup>28</sup> 'Le public dont il s'agit ici est donc borné aux personnes qui lisent, qui connaissent les spectacles, qui voient et qui entendent parler de tableaux, ou qui ont acquis de quelque manière que ce soit ce discernement qu'on appelle *goût de comparaison*' (Du Bos, *Réflexions*, p. 279).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 289.

of tragedy, because history painting's means are visual, and more direct and natural than those of speech.<sup>30</sup> Du Bos was one of the first of a whole range of French eighteenth-century thinkers who believed that facial expression and the language of gestures were older and more natural languages than human speech. He called speech an artificial language.

However, Du Bos also voiced the opinion that poetry is able to depict complicated emotions and actions, while painting is tied to the depiction of one moment, which should have maximum expressivity and eloquence. Not surprisingly, Du Bos no longer accepted Le Brun's solution; he did not allow painters to overcome the problem by depicting a sequence of events. History painting is, in Du Bos's theory, not a literal translation of a text into images, but an independent medium. The term 'intérêt' so dear to sensualist philosophers, crops up several times when Du Bos talks about the subjects and compositions fit for poets and history painters. Du Bos attached great value to simple, easily recognisable subjects, from the Bible, Classical mythology and Classical history, the fund from which history painting had always taken its subjects. These are fit to raise the viewers' interest in the scene. Du Bos discerned two kinds of interest, 'intérêt général' (subjects interesting to all mankind) and 'intérêt de rapport' (subjects interesting to a limited group of people). This last category in particular he deemed fit to hold our interest and attention.<sup>31</sup> Du Bos uses this category for scenes from modern history, only interesting for the inhabitants of a certain country. Subjects like Joan of Arc make the public aware of a shared national past.

Du Bos also stresses that the painter is decidedly superior to the poet because he can actually show the degree of interest that the figures in a painting take in the depicted event, something poets are unable to do.<sup>32</sup> This idea would influence Diderot's theories on interest and absorption.

Du Bos drew on De Piles's theories when he said that to give the one moment maximum effect, history painters could use the technical means available to painters, like perspective and *clair-obscur*, to draw the public's attention to the protagonist(s) and main action of the painting. Du Bos agreed with De Piles that the technical prowess of a painter could be enough

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<sup>30</sup> 'Je crois que le pouvoir de la peinture est plus grand sur les hommes que celui de la poésie et j'appuie mon sentiment sur deux raisons. La première est que la peinture agit sur nous par le moyen du sens de la vue. La seconde est que la peinture n'emploie pas de signes artificiels, ainsi que fait la poésie, mais bien des signes naturels' (*ibidem*, p. 133).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25-26.

<sup>32</sup> 'Les passions sont variées, même dans les personnes qui, suivant la supposition de l'artisan, doivent prendre un égal intérêt à l'action principale du tableau ... Or le poète ne saurait rendre cette diversité sensible dans ses vers' (*ibidem*, p. 31).

to create a beautiful painting, but he limited this to paintings (genre paintings, still life etc.) where the subject in itself was not enough to raise the viewer's curiosity. In history painting, Du Bos recognised two different kinds of composition, 'composition poétique' and 'composition pittoresque'. As in De Piles's theory, composition pittoresque served to draw the viewer's attention to the painting, but Du Bos stressed that in history painting it was completely subservient to the intellectual understanding of the painting.

Technique was of little importance to Du Bos and he only paid lip service to it so as to be able to build upon and surpass De Piles's theory. He strongly believed that painters, 'les gens du métier', were not the best judges of their own work, but that the task of judging paintings should be left to enlightened amateurs, men of taste.

### *Painting and the stage*

The question of the superiority of painting or poetry does not seem to be resolved in Du Bos's text. That the scales were turning in favour of painting becomes clear not only from Du Bos's eulogy on the directness of painting and its ability to imitate nature, but also from his assumption that a tragedy, when performed on stage, is far more able to move its public than when it is only read.<sup>33</sup> Du Bos was also hesitant when it came to defining a new public for history painting.

In eighteenth-century theoretical writings on acting, as well as in stage practice, the expressive use of the face, gestures and voice became a means to grasp the public's attention, partly independent of the spoken text. The visual aspect of acting became steadily more important and, according to some theorists, by cultivating this part of his work, an actor could show himself to be a real artist. An actor of genius, like an artist of genius, would not slavishly follow rules but would find his own style of acting. Du Bos even thought that like a painter, the actor was trying to communicate with his public directly and at a deeply emotional level.<sup>34</sup>

Since the visual aspects of acting were developing very fast at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the stage became an important source of inspiration for painters. Especially Antoine Coypel (1661-1722) and his son Charles-Antoine (director of the Academy from 1747 to 1752), both history painters and theorists who were also involved with the theatre, believed that history painters should imitate the emphatic gesturing of actors in order to

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 136.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 140-141.

make the one significant moment speak with utmost clarity to the public.<sup>35</sup> For the same reason, they were highly interested in De Piles's theories. The dramatic and purely artificial possibilities of clair-obscur would enable the painter to mass background figures and to use sketchiness and finish to indicate the figures' relative importance in the painting. In this way, the viewer would be able to grasp the painting's message immediately.

Unfortunately, this working method, not very daring even in the hands of De Piles, quickly became reduced to a series of prescriptions that made the composition of large history paintings ever more predictable. The protagonist was always depicted in full light, less important figures in shadow, gestures and facial expressions were highly emphatic and conventional.<sup>36</sup> Round the middle of the century, in the hands of actors like Lekaïn and Mlle Clairon, acting also became a matter of creating carefully pondered effects. Every step they took and every gesture they made was deliberate.

Critics of French art, such as Lessing, pointed to the high level of artificiality, and dependency on ready-made, 'stagy' prescriptions in French eighteenth-century history painting. Looking back on this period in the art of their country, artists and critics who had undergone the salutary influence of the reform of painting undertaken by Jacques-Louis David at the end of the eighteenth century, also cried out against history painting's dependency on theatrical stage-sets, facial expressions and gestures.<sup>37</sup>

### *The artistic crisis of the middle of the eighteenth century*

Both painting and theatre entered the public domain to a far greater extent in the eighteenth century than they had been able to do in the seventeenth. Real public theatres were built and painters who were members of the Academy were given a chance to show their work to the public at the Salons, the regular public exhibitions of the works of living artists, organised by the Academy from 1737 onwards.

During the first half of the century, well-educated young men wishing to make a career as a writer flocked to Paris. Unfortunately, the old system of protection that had helped an earlier generation was increasingly unable to support them. The only option open to them was that of becoming independent, and poor, men of letters.<sup>38</sup> As a result, new callings like art and literary critic came into existence. Indeed, independent writers had been

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<sup>35</sup> Kirchner, *L'expression*, pp. 118, 137-156.

<sup>36</sup> Puttfarcken, *Roger de Piles' theory of art*, pp. 131-132.

<sup>37</sup> Jonker, 'Overwonnen theatraliteit'.

<sup>38</sup> Darnton, *The literary underground*, pp. 19-21.

the ones to demand that the privileged Academicians, 'servants of the king', should make their works accessible to the people, and that this should be made possible through the establishment of the Salons.

The Academicians exhibiting their works at the Salon were constantly under attack from these lay critics, who deplored the lack of serious painting fit to educate the French people. Since the Salon was an attraction that drew crowds, people from every class of society, this question became a very important one. Art criticism became a veiled form of social protest against a nobility increasingly eager to retain its traditional privileges and to keep newcomers out of its ranks. During the eighteenth century, it became increasingly difficult for commoners to rise to noble rank, and to be received at court, although living the life of a wealthy, aristocratic landowner remained the aim of social climbers. In art criticism, both the Academy and the sensuous art of Boucher and Fragonard were associated with the decadence and arrogance of the court nobility.

Shortly before 1750, the critic La Font de Saint-Yenne started a campaign for the regeneration of history painting. He was the archetypical man of letters who existed at the fringe of Paris society. The increasing venom of his writings equals the increasing resentment against the decadence and arrogance of the courtiers. He held up the subjects from Roman history, already depicted by Poussin, as the example for young history painters to follow. La Font saw the Romans as a people completely indifferent to the sloth and idleness that characterised the lifestyle of the French court. The Roman maintained simplicity and economy in his private life and made the sound constitution of the state into 'son bien propre, et son intérêt personnel'.<sup>39</sup> The term interest now took on a rebellious meaning; La Font placed the court nobility outside the circle of those who supported the interests of the state. With him, a painting should incite a harsh sense of duty, pointing forward to that of the French Revolution. Brutus, sentencing his sons to death for treason was a subject to his taste. Pity, the sentiment that a painting should inspire according to Du Bos, and the harmonious family life which Diderot would later wish to see in a painting, were both completely absent from La Font's writings.<sup>40</sup>

The Academy found itself in dire straits around 1750. It could not counter criticism of its privileged position with history paintings fit to educate the whole of the French nation. Painters belonging to the Academy were now hardly interested in history painting, simply because their traditional aristocratic patrons were no longer interested in it. The state, impoverished by the Seven Years' War, had no money to sponsor a revival of se-

<sup>39</sup> La Font de Saint-Yenne, *Sentimens*, p. 92.

<sup>40</sup> Démoris and Ferran, *La peinture*, pp. 166 and 172.

rious history painting in Poussin's austere manner. To strengthen its position, the Academy launched the genre painter Greuze as the artist able to give subjects from modern life, attractive to a large public, a nobility and interest reminiscent of Poussin.<sup>41</sup>

*Diderot and the theory of interest*

Denis Diderot (1713-1784), although hostile to the Academy, was taken in by the Academy's attempt to create a new kind of elevated painting for a large public. He even believed that Greuze's paintings were nobler and succeeded far better at reaching a large public than contemporary attempts at real history painting.

Diderot's attempts at reforming the theatre, making it suitable for a large public, had resulted in a new theatrical genre, the 'drame bourgeois'. It staged family conflicts. The theme of *Le père de famille* (1758), for example, is a young nobleman who wishes to marry a poor girl. His father and uncle are opposed to this and try to get the girl out of the way with the help of a 'lettre de cachet' (one of the most important symbols of aristocratic abuse of power). Near the end of the play the girl proves to be a member of the nobility, whose family had lost all their money. The father gives his generous consent to the marriage, but the uncle remains opposed to it and decides to break off contact with his family. Diderot's choice of protagonists can be taken as an indication that independent men of letters stemming from the lower classes, obsessed as they were by fighting their way into the highest social circles, sometimes took the road of projecting their social ideal on a thoroughly reformed nobility instead of attacking the highest classes. The name 'drame bourgeois' presupposes a strong bourgeois sense of identity, which did in fact not exist.<sup>42</sup>

The plot of *Le père de famille* sums up Diderot's preoccupation with a happy family life as the base of personal happiness, and indeed as the base of a well-ordered society. He who deliberately breaks all bonds with his family, like the uncle in *Le père de famille*, or the son who leaves his home as a mercenary in Greuze's *Le fils ingrat* (sketch, Salon of 1765), puts himself outside society and loses every chance of happiness.<sup>43</sup>

Already in 1730, the playwright Antoine Houdar de la Motte had coined the term 'unité d'intérêt'. It was the unity that would make the accepted unities of time, place and action superfluous and that could serve on

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<sup>41</sup> Crow, *Painters*, p. 142.

<sup>42</sup> Roberts, *Morality*, p. 101.

<sup>43</sup> Lewinter, 'L'exaltation'.

its own to hold the composition of a tragedy together. Unity of interest means that the spectator, from the first to the last second, must have his mind occupied and be emotionally moved by one theme. It must be present in every one scene and every person. When the protagonist is in danger, the play should only show persons who add to his danger, or who share his danger with him. The climax of the play must be a scene in which the greatest danger is overcome or the greatest virtue is shown.<sup>44</sup> La Motte warned that the play must show a variety of circumstances, to prevent it from degenerating into tedious repetition.

Although he did not use the exact term 'unité d'intérêt', Diderot also made use of the word interest. Diderot saw this quality in Greuze's most important works. *Piété filiale* from 1763, for instance, depicts a family united around the bed of a lamed patriarch (plate 2). The measure of interest that each member of the family showed in the well-being of the old man, according to age and character, and the way in which it was expressed not only in their face, but in their whole being, gave the painting its unity.<sup>45</sup> This unity stemmed from the very nature of the subject, instead of being imposed upon it, like the literary unities of time, place and action, which had governed seventeenth-century artistic thought.

The composition of a painting like *Piété filiale* was in Diderot's eyes organic, a mirror of the ideal order of society and of the mutual interdependence of all beings, which was expressed in the idea of the great chain of being. Although the world depicted on stage and in a painting had to look as much like our own world as possible, the choice of persons and circumstances had to be entirely artificial, to enable painting to mirror the order of nature.<sup>46</sup>

Like many of his contemporaries, Diderot believed that in French eighteenth-century society man had lost his natural state of happiness and interdependence and was subject to the threats and temptations of city life. He felt that only by choosing an unusual scene in the life of a family, like the signing of a marriage contract in *L'Accordée de village* of 1761, or the moment when (in *Piété filiale*) the whole family is gathered round the lamed father's bed, who expresses his gratitude in a very lively fashion, could an artist make natural unity felt.<sup>47</sup> In the imperfection and drudgery of day-to-day-life, this unity would never become visible.

<sup>44</sup> La Motte, *Discours*, vol. 4, p. 45.

<sup>45</sup> Diderot, *Œuvres* (ed. Vernière), pp. 524-529.

<sup>46</sup> Körner, *Auf der Suche*, pp. 90-91, 113-114, 120.

<sup>47</sup> 'Le moment qu'ils demandent est un moment commun, sans intérêt; celui que le peintre a choisi est particulier; par hasard il arriva ce jour-là que ce fut son gendre

Diderot deplored the way in which contemporary history painting tried to raise the viewers' interest by emphatic gesturing and facial expression. Both in his theories on the drame bourgeois and in his art criticism, he developed the idea of 'absorption'.<sup>48</sup> Paradoxically, we become interested in the fate of the people the playwright and painter show to us, since they seem to exist in a world of their own, completely separate from ours, and are entirely absorbed by their own activities and own affairs. The text of Diderot's plays is larded with stage directions that describe every detail of the stage set, but also a new naturalistic way for actors to behave on stage. Like Du Bos, Diderot believed that speech is only one way to express emotions, and that gestures and facial expressions are older and more natural languages. Naturalism is sometimes taken so far that persons on stage do not even seem to communicate with each other, but are entirely absorbed in their own activities and thoughts.<sup>49</sup> Painting is easily recognisable as a source of inspiration of Diderot's 'dramas bourgeois'; Diderot built in 'tableaux' at highly emotional moments of crisis in the action. At these moments, the threads of the action come together, and the persons show their conflicts openly, or are united in grief or joy.

Diderot's art theory is entirely visual. Not only in the intellectual part of the composition of a painting, but also in the colours and colour effects, he saw a deliberate artistic imitation of the rapports essential to the great chain of being. In Greuze's works, art showed these rapports in the most perfect way, because here they resulted from a moralising intent, and the composition of the painting seemed to rise naturally from subject and moral.<sup>50</sup>

Diderot saw rapports also in Chardin's non-moralising genre-paintings; but since they were based only on careful manipulation of colours

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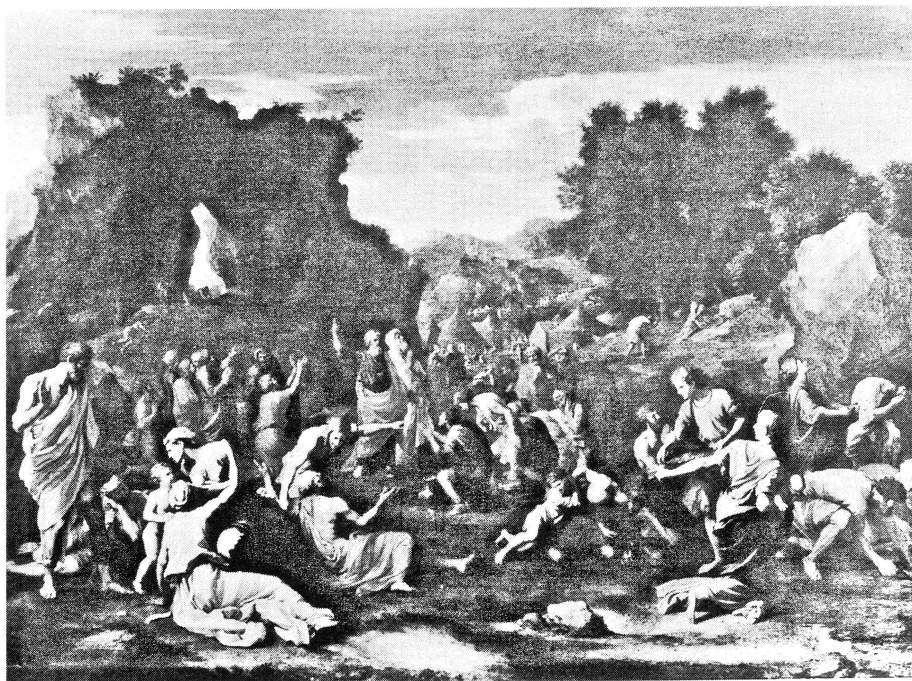
qui lui apporta des aliments, et le bonhomme, touché, lui en témoigna sa gratitude d'une manière si vive, si pénétrée, qu'elle suspendit les occupations et fixa l'attention de toute la famille', in: Diderot, *Œuvres* (ed. Vernière), p. 527.

<sup>48</sup> For the idea of absorption in Diderot's thinking and its development during the eighteenth century, see Fried, *Absorption*.

<sup>49</sup> See for instance the stage directions of *Le père de famille*: 'Sur le devant de la salle, on voit le père de famille, qui se promène à pas lents. Il a la tête baissée, les bras croisées, et l'air tout à fait pensif. Un peu sur le fond, vers la cheminée, qui est à l'un des côtés de la salle, le commandeur et sa nièce font une partie de trictrac. Derrière le commandeur, un peu plus près du feu, Germeuil est assis négligemment dans un fauteuil, un livre à la main. Il en interrompt de temps en temps la lecture pour regarder tendrement Cécile dans les moments où elle est occupée de son jeu, et où il ne peut en être aperçu' (Diderot, 'Le père de famille', *Œuvres*, ed. Chouillet and Chouillet, p. 191).

<sup>50</sup> Körner, *Auf der Suche*, pp. 107-108.

and colour relationships, in the end Diderot could not accept Chardin as Greuze's equal. The edifying role of art that had already been essential to the seventeenth-century history painter's self-esteem, survived all changes in outlook, from the beginnings of the Academy to Diderot's art criticism. Changes in interpretation of well-known and traditional concepts could only occur when art theory changed hands from groups identifying with authority and the social status quo, to groups who, for various reasons, felt excluded from the highest social circles, or only accepted when they shed their identities and beliefs. In this article I could only outline this history, which merits to be researched in detail.



1. Nicolas Poussin, *The gathering of the manna*, 1639, Paris,  
Musée du Louvre, 149 x 200 cm.  
Photograph courtesy of the library of the University of Amsterdam.



2. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Piété filiale*, 1763, Saint Petersburg,  
Hermitage, 115.5 x 146 cm.  
Photograph courtesy of the library of the University of Amsterdam