

CHAPTER 1 MODERN PRACTICES OF ART AND MODERNITY

by Nigel Blake and Francis Frascina

Introduction: art as a social practice

The terms 'modernity' and 'postmodernity' are used not only in the history and criticism of art, but also in social history and theory. It is often claimed that where there used to be a widespread consensus as to what was valid and valuable in modern art and modern society, there is now radical disagreement, that there reigns a 'pluralism' of cultures and value systems, ideologies, religions, beliefs about gender, race and class. Yet there is strong disagreement as to what this plurality might mean or imply. Was there ever a real consensus anyway? If there was, has it broken down irretrievably, and perhaps a good thing too? Or is it the case that modern art and society require a more complex consideration of other possibilities, but a 'modern' notion of what is valid and valuable still stands?

Can we make progress with these questions by treating separately the two sets of issues – those about art and those concerning social developments? Some critics and historians believe this is possible and desirable. Like the Modernist critic Clement Greenberg in his influential essay 'Avant-garde and kitsch' (first published in 1939), some believe that the earliest development of modern art *was* bound up with social developments, with the activities and theories of revolutionary politics in mid-nineteenth-century France in particular, but that later in the century this ceased to be the case. To examine this argument more closely, we need to consider how that relationship worked.

Bohemia and the avant-garde

Both revolutionary politics and 'avant-garde' art evolved, so the argument goes, in the social context of 'Bohemianism'. Originally, Bohemianism referred to vagabondage or to the life of wandering gypsies, as represented, for example, in Zo's *Family of Voyaging Bohemians* (Plate 44). 'Bohemia', formerly a kingdom, now a province of western Czechoslovakia, was considered the home of the gypsies. The term was taken up in the nineteenth century by many artists and intellectuals who saw themselves as *metaphorically* 'homeless' within the culture of capitalist society. For them, 'Bohemianism' became an outlook; it indicated a protest against, an independence from, or an indifference to established social conventions. This is not to say that the concept had a fixed meaning: it took complex, ambiguous and often incompatible forms – including fanaticism, asceticism and disillusion with established education and decorum. Rather, it was an attitude cultivated by those impoverished artists and intellectuals who existed on the margins of society, often complicit with, but not part of, the '*classes dangereuses*', the 'dangerous classes', regarded as the seed-bed of revolution, crime and disorder. 'Bohemians' were opposed to established authority, but without systematic political creed or organization. Many of



Plate 44 Achille Zo, *Famille bohémienne en voyage* (Family of Travelling Bohemians), 1861, oil on canvas, 127 x 160 cm. Photo © Musée Bonnat, Bayonne.

them joined the insurrection in the 1848 Revolution, fighting on the side of those artisans who reacted violently to modernization and the implementation of capitalist economic priorities. The revolution's failure was followed by a new authoritarian political order in the 1850s and 1860s, which brought an acceleration of economic and social change.

Bohemians were uniform only in their alienation from bourgeois society and the organizational principles of capitalism. To see early 'avant-garde' art within this context, therefore, as something produced by those steeped in 'Bohemianism', is to see it as in some sense 'oppositional' to both of these. We need, though, to distinguish 'avant-garde' from 'Bohemian'. The concept of the 'avant-garde' is profoundly ideological and shifting (as indeed was that of 'Bohemia'). On the one hand, for many privileged 'radicals' in the nineteenth century, 'avant-garde' was an expedient and fashionable label used for social climbing, a temporary token to be ditched when returning to a comfortable status in existing society. Many such vogueish radicals sided, by contrast with the 'Bohemians', with the forces of order in 1848. On the other hand, those 'avant-gardists' who saw themselves as having a deeper social and political commitment attempted to engage with strategies and forms of representation, including painting and literature, that were perceived as critiques of existing conventions and of the power structures which underpinned them. In this chapter, we are concerned with the second kind of avant-gardist.

Two of the practitioners discussed here – the painter Gustave Courbet and the poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire – were inhabitants of this 'Bohemia' and early 'avant-gardists'. The painter Édouard Manet was a bourgeois 'intellectual' who cultivated close contacts with 'Bohemia', including Courbet and Baudelaire themselves.

But, to pursue the argument we introduced, Greenberg claims that 'avant-garde' art soon 'succeeded in "detaching" ... itself from society', and that from this detachment a 'pure' modern art emerged:

it proceeded to turn around and repudiate revolutionary politics as well as bourgeois. The revolution was left inside society, a part of that welter of ideological struggle which art and poetry find so unpropitious as soon as it begins to involve those 'precious' axiomatic beliefs upon which culture thus far has had to rest ... Retiring from public [*sic*] altogether, the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing and raising it to the level of an absolute ... 'Art for art's sake' and 'pure poetry' appear, and subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like the plague. ('Avant-garde and kitsch', p.36)

From such a highly influential Modernist perspective, the history of the development of 'modern' art in the nineteenth century is the history of an heroic avant-garde which moves away from literary and historical subject-matter towards an art of 'pure sensation' or 'art for art's sake'. 'Avant-garde' art is seen as 'detaching' itself from the concerns of social and political life, in the same way as the poetry of Mallarmé, for example, which stresses formal word play, is regarded as a crucial move toward 'pure poetry' – poetry without an object. We find here a claim that once 'modern' or 'avant-garde' art got going, it ceased to be much influenced by, or committed to, wider social developments – or that where such an influence exists, it's not what matters most in accounting for what is valid and valuable in such art. This claim is often referred to as the thesis of the *social autonomy of art*. Modernists see such autonomy as a positive counterpart to the 'corrupted' products, the 'kitsch' – popular fiction and music, Hollywood movies, working-class or proletarian culture – of ordinary life and mass consumption. Greenberg's 'Avant-garde and kitsch' is a classic text for those who subscribe to the primacy of 'art for art sake' and believe in the emancipatory potential of a disinterested aesthetic experience. (By 'disinterested', they mean without issues of morality, utility or what they would see as 'special pleading', impinging upon the 'imaginative life' of Art, with a capital 'A'.) The quality of the aesthetic and aesthetic experience which they seek are to be measured at least in part by the degree to which a work of art is explicitly *independent* of, or 'transcends', socio-cultural issues, and becomes concerned with itself, with 'art for art's sake'.

The thesis of the social autonomy of art and this notion of 'aesthetic experience' is used to select a canon of artists and works of art. Within this canon Monet's practice is exemplary in its move from paintings such as those of bourgeois leisure at La Grenouillère (Plates 155–157), to works that concentrate exclusively on formal and technical equivalents for subjective sensations, such as those of his purposely constructed water-lily pond (Plate 200) painted from the late 1890s onward.

There is evidence, as Greenberg suggests, that the connotations of the term 'avant-garde' changed, especially after 1870. Losing its earlier (though sometimes tenuous) association with left-wing opposition, it came to signify for many, mainly cultural and artistic interests. However, there are grounds for doubting whether this view of the development of 'modern' art and of the 'avant-garde' is tenable. Some have argued that Modernist art history has evacuated the historical – and especially the political – territory defined by the term 'avant-garde', using the term as a catch-all label to celebrate a particular line of development, an exclusive canon. We wish to argue that some early modern artists were not merely passively affected by major social changes, but responded to them by modifying the relationship between the art they produced and the social world. We would also like to question the degree to which early 'avant-garde' modern art was intended to be 'art for art's sake', to avoid subject-matter or content 'like the plague', or even to downgrade its importance. These two ideas are linked of course. One way – but not the only way – that certain artists shifted the relationship between art and society was precisely by

dealing with new subjects like the modern city, or by dealing with old-established subjects such as landscape, in a 'modern' way – perhaps even an 'oppositional' way, in the original, political sense of 'avant-garde'.

One of our main aims here is to examine a socio-historical account of such shifts of emphasis or 'meaning' as they are represented by Courbet's *Burial at Ornans*, 1849–50, and Manet's *The Old Musician*, 1862, on the one hand, and on the other Manet's *Boaters at Argenteuil*, Monet's *Effect of Autumn at Argenteuil* and Pissarro's factory landscapes at Pontoise, all produced in the 1870s (Plates 55, 67, 100, 104 and 123, 125, 126, 127). These case studies have been selected so as to consider issues of method relevant to the social history of art, including examples of major approaches in this tradition.

The heroism of modern life

There is much evidence in the early writings on 'modernity' – particularly those of Baudelaire – to suggest that artists and critics saw modern social experiences as inseparable from a self-conscious attitude to the means by which those experiences could be represented. In his essay 'The Salon of 1846: on the heroism of modern life', Baudelaire extolled the 'heroic' aspects of the underworld of the newly modernized and ever-transforming metropolitan city. For him, the life of contemporary Paris was 'rich in poetic and marvellous subjects': the uniform drabness of people's dress, the modern phenomenon of the 'dandy' who reacts against this drabness, the 'private subjects' of prostitution and criminalization, the new *flâneur* who strolls around the city 'botanizing on the asphalt', and seeking the anonymity of the crowd, an asylum for all those on the 'margins' of society – economically, socially, intellectually.¹

In his often quoted definition of 'modernity' as an 'attitude' or 'consciousness', Baudelaire identified two main elements: 'the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and immutable' ('The painter of modern life', 1863, p.553). *Modern man* (sic), he argues, is compelled to the risk of becoming a self-conscious being or agent, without the 'safety' of the given roles and conventions of the past. His resource is an ironic heroicization of the *present* ('the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent'), a transfiguring play of freedom with contemporary reality, an ascetic elaboration of the self as bohemian. But this needs to be achieved by engaging with those ideas, conventions, ordering principles and expressive means of art practice (for example, symbol systems, perspective, anatomy, use of light and shade) which make up the 'eternal and immutable'. For Baudelaire, modern life is so contradictory that such 'modernity' can only be produced in 'art', in *representations*. This is to suggest that forms of social consciousness, by which individuals construct their identity, can only be adequately expressed in modern life by means of metaphors, by representations. In the social production of their existence, people enter into definite forces and relations which are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a particular stage of development of their material productive forces, here modernization, industrialization and the structures of modern capitalism.² The 'painter of modern life' who takes on this novel task is

solitary, gifted with an active imagination, always travelling across *the great human desert*, [he] has an aim loftier than that of a mere *flâneur*, an aim more general, something other than the fugitive pleasure of circumstance. He is looking for that quality which you must allow me to call *modernity* ...

('The painter of modern life', p.553)

¹ See Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?'

² See Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.

Plate 45 Constantin Guys,
Trois femmes près d'un comptoir
 (Three Women by a Bar), 1860,
 pen and wash and watercolour,
 25 x 18 cm. Petit Palais, Paris.
 Photo: Musées de la Ville de
 Paris/ Pierrain. © SPADEM, Paris
 and DACS, London.



Immediately, we can see closures here on grounds of gender – modern *man* – and on class – the *flâneur*, perhaps also an intellectual, with time for observing contemporary life. Does Baudelaire mean the modern *bourgeois man* when talking of the compelling force of ‘modernity’?³ Specifically, in this text he singles out Constantin Guys, an artist who represented contemporary experience and subjects (Plate 45).

We can observe an important, complementary view of the contemporary experience of Baudelaire’s ‘modern man’, who is looking for that quality called ‘modernity’, in the social and political writings of Marx and Engels. Baudelaire lived in a period that experienced what Marx and Engels described as the ‘constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation [which] distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones’. They argued that, historically, the bourgeoisie had played ‘a most revolutionary part’ in establishing modern industry, the world market and free trade (the characteristics of *modernization*).⁴ Drawing

³ See Janet Wolff, ‘The invisible *flâneuse*’.

⁴ By the bourgeoisie, they meant the ‘class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of production and employers of wage labour’.

particular relationship between this class and their modernizing interests, Marx and Engels saw 'modernity' as an ever-transforming experience, where all that once seemed 'solid' and certain 'melts into air' (quotations from 'The Manifesto of the Communist Party', pp.37–8). For them, the bourgeois epoch was characterized by the transformation from 'ancient and venerable traditions, opinions and customs' to the modern capitalist system. Baudelaire wrote on one product of this modern capitalist system, the crowd of urban manual workers, in a preface to the collected poems of his friend Pierre Dupont, a worker-poet of the 1848 Revolution (*Chants et Chansons*, 1851). With reference to 'Le Chant des ouvriers', Dupont's 'strong and true poem', he wrote:

Whatever party one may belong to, on whose prejudices one has been nourished, it is impossible not to be gripped by the spectacle of this sickly crowd which breathes in the dust of workshops, swallows particles of cotton, becomes saturated with white-lead, mercury and all the poisons necessary for the creation of masterpieces.

(*Oeuvres complètes*, p.293)

There's obvious irony here in the word 'masterpieces'. What 'masterpieces'? In Baudelaire's view, it took an heroic constitution to live through the transforming and contradictory conditions of modernity. One of the 'spectacles' of modernity was the populace on the margins of society, a populace which constituted one modern *subject*. While this subject was needed for the production of modern 'masterpieces' so, too, were 'all the poisons', such as white lead pigment, which the urban proletariat produced under new and oppressive workshop and factory conditions. In this preface, Baudelaire also condemned the 'puerile utopia of the school of *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake), [which] in excluding morality, and often even passion, necessarily made itself sterile'. He concluded, 'henceforth art was inseparable from morality and utility' ('The painter of modern life', p.291–2). For Baudelaire 'art' was ultimately connected to social experiences, to the contingencies of actual life. Specifically, in the mid-nineteenth century, this meant the negative transformations wrought by modernization and the economic interests of the 'epoch', the same characteristics of the age that were the subject of Marx and Engels' interest.

Baudelaire despised the official physical and social reconstruction which characterized the 'bourgeois epoch'; for him 'heroic' subjects were to be found in the 'underworld of city life' rather than the spectacle of revamped fashionable spaces. Truly modern representations needed to engage with social experiences, and with what he regarded as the contradictory signs and immediate sensations of contemporary life, where all that once seemed solid 'melts into air'. Baudelaire warned of the dangers of neglecting this 'half of art':

you do not have the right to despise or dispense with this transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid. By neglecting it, you inevitably tumble into the void of an abstract and indefinable beauty ... If for the necessary costume of the epoch you substitute another, you will be guilty of a mistranslation ...

('The painter of modern life', p.554)

Was Baudelaire warning, in 1863, that a detachment of 'art' from society could lead to the 'void of an abstract and indefinable beauty'? In 1855 Courbet had written of 'the trivial goal of art for art's sake', and in 1861, prefiguring Baudelaire's warning about the 'void', he wrote in an open letter to his students that:

painting is an essentially *concrete* art and can only consist of the representation of *real and existing* things. It is a completely physical language, the words of which consist of all visible objects; an object which is *abstract*, not visible, non-existent, is not within the realm of painting...

(*Le Courrier du dimanche*, extract in Nochlin, *Realism and Tradition in Art*, p.35)

Two years later, Jules-Antoine Castagnary, the art critic and champion of Courbet's Realism, echoed both the latter's view and Baudelaire's idea of 'modernity':

The object of painting is to express, according to the nature of the means at its disposal, the society which produced it ... Society is actually a moral being which does not know itself directly and which, in order to be conscious of reality, needs to externalize itself, as the philosophers say, to put its potentialities in action and to see itself in the general view of their products. Each era knows itself only through the deeds it has accomplished: political deeds, literary deeds, scientific deeds, industrial deeds, artistic deeds ... As a result, painting is not at all an abstract conception, elevated above history, a stranger to human vicissitudes, to the revolutions of ideas and customs; it is part of the social consciousness, a fragment of the mirror in which the generations each look at themselves in turn, and as such it must follow society step by step, in order to take a note of its incessant transformations.

(*'Le Salon de 1863', Le Nord*, extract in Nochlin, *Realism and Tradition in Art*, p.64)

Thus it was an established point of view in mid-nineteenth-century France that modern art could not be understood in isolation from modern society. The same point of view has led many historians to agree that the very idea of 'art for art's sake' had important social origins at a specific moment of transformation in France, after the abortive Revolution of 1848. Those within the Marxist tradition, such as the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin, argue that the original strategy of *l'art pour l'art* was itself 'oppositional', but that its critical potential was frustrated and transformed by the political and social interests of the bourgeoisie during the Second Empire of Napoleon III:

the theory of *l'art pour l'art* assumed decisive importance around 1852, at a time when the bourgeoisie sought to take its 'cause' from the hands of the writers and the poets. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx recollects this moment when the bourgeoisie ... called upon Napoleon 'to destroy their speaking and writing segment, their politicians and literati, so that they might confidently pursue their private affairs under the protection of a strong and untrammelled government'. At the end of this development may be found Mallarmé and the theory of *poésie pure*. There the cause of his own class has become so far removed from the poet that the problem of literature without an object becomes the centre of discussion. This discussion takes place not least in Mallarmé's poems, which revolve around *blanc, absence, silence, vide* [blank, absence, silence, void].

(W. Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, p.106)

Benjamin is concerned with the theories of 'art for art's sake' and 'pure poetry', as Greenberg was in the passage quoted earlier, but for different reasons. He argues that in cultural forms, here poetry, many practitioners during this period no longer undertook to support explicitly any of the causes pursued by the class to which they belonged. With Mallarmé this 'basic renunciation of all manifest experiences of [his class], causes specific and considerable difficulties. These difficulties turn his poetry into an *esoteric poetry*' (*Charles Baudelaire*, p.106; our emphasis). This is to say that many artists and intellectuals such as Mallarmé, took an *aesthetic* route out of the contradictions of society by developing the complexities of their art, as *Art*. In this 'escape' they found a form of 'emancipation' from the contradictions of life. In contrast to this tendency, Benjamin argued that Baudelaire's works are 'not esoteric' because 'social experiences' are inscribed in them in 'extensive round-about ways'.

Baudelaire's concept of 'modernity', and Castagnary's view of art as a part of the 'social consciousness', contribute to a critical tradition different from the one associated with Greenberg. This tradition informed the work of the art historian Meyer Schapiro. Writing at the same period as Greenberg in 'Avant-garde and kitsch', he argued that:

the scientific elements of representation in older art – perspective, anatomy, light and shade – are ordering principles and expressive means as well as devices of rendering. All renderings of objects, no matter how exact they seem, even photographs, proceed from values, methods and viewpoints which somehow shape the image and often determine its contents. On the other hand, there is no 'pure art', unconditioned by experience; all fantasy and formal construction, even the random scribbling of the hand, are shaped by experience and by non-esthetic concerns.

(*'Nature of abstract art'*, pp.85–6)

Schapiro stresses the fact that works of art are products of social practices of various kinds. Understanding and 'consuming' works of art – viewing, enjoying, owning them – are also social practices. Further, the practices of consumption and production are inter-linked. How artists paint will be affected by their *own* understanding of what they're doing and perhaps by their *audience's* understanding of what they are doing. All artists' productions are governed by consumption – either by some mental or unconscious notion of who the imagined viewer might be, or by having a particular patron in mind – and in many instances by *both*. If this is so, there is no autonomous 'pure art', and by extension no disinterested, unconditioned 'aesthetic experience'. Both are socially and culturally 'shaped' even where artists, critics or viewers seek to 'transcend' social and cultural factors. That 'seeking' is itself a result of particular historical factors, as Benjamin suggests with respect to Mallarmé.

Why need we talk about producing and consuming art as *practices*? And why *social* practices? The production of a work of art is a complex activity. Placing pigment on a canvas, for instance, requires not only a thorough knowledge of the techniques of mark-making and an understanding of the mixing of colours, but also experience in the physical qualities of the brushes and paint being used. This kind of knowledge requires not only a familiarity with the markets for materials and the possibilities and constraints they constitute, but also an understanding of the needs of clients.

The choice of size and medium, with the physical constraints these entail, and the requirements of greater or lesser durability, interact with choices of subject and style. And these involve complicated historical and social judgements. In part they will have to do with a knowledge of what contemporary artists are doing and why; but a deep understanding of the history and traditions of art is also required. The choice of a subject will sometimes entail artists making judgements about the *conventional* understandings of the subject and its tradition, and at other times prompt artists to change or adapt conventions. Such changes may in turn involve consideration of the work of others, such as historians, philosophers, and writers. Each kind of knowledge and judgement is exercised in the context of an expanding network of activities. None of them is fully independent of the other. For each of the many 'sub-tasks' involved in making a picture, there are typically a number of possible methods. Artists don't begin new work by going right back to basics, but reconsider the technical, stylistic or interpretative alternatives currently available. Most artists imitate, or work within, one of a few available models, or *paradigms*. Sometimes this leads to predictable and conformist art, at other times the 'paradigms' are transformed with significant innovations. When we talk of an artist's *practice* we are referring to the network of activities which go into the production of a picture. We do not imply, however, that these different ways of working have all been systematically and consciously considered. Few artists have a single uniform practice; most operate in different ways under different circumstances. An important task in describing such a practice is to give an account of the paradigms within which it operates – the particular works or examples of working which could be treated as model instances of what that artist produces and how he or she operates.

All of an artist's activities have *social* preconditions. Buying materials and selling work both involve markets with their own economic systems and technological innovations. Typically, artists are trained within educational institutions with their staff, curricula and sources of funding and control. Choice and interpretation of subjects will probably have reference to what is popular or fashionable, topical, acceptable or familiar, or may relate to current intellectual ideas. All these characteristics presuppose a public which has its own education, interests, media and so on. Reference to art history and artistic traditions presupposes that artists and their audience record and pass on knowledge about art – and this too is a social activity. It is hard to conceive of any artistic activity that does not have a social aspect.

The 'consumption' and understanding of art usually presupposes some teaching, if only informal, which involves identifying critics or knowledgeable viewers as 'teachers'. The 'consumption' of art usually involves visiting exhibitions, galleries or studios, all of which have their own specific decorum. Knowledge of art might be gained through books, magazines and newspaper articles. Buying, reading, and even corresponding with these are very specific social activities. Not least, the viewer often brings to works of art moral, religious and political standards which socially condition what is regarded as 'aesthetic'; the criteria used in judgements of 'quality' in fifteenth-century Florence, for example, were different from those used in post-industrial societies. Adopting, comparing, changing and applying such standards are themselves social activities, and they occur in social contexts. A viewer's reaction to a painting such as Manet's *Olympia* (Plate 14), may have much to do with issues of gender and attitudes to sexuality, and thus to love, family life, prostitution, social decorum, conventionality and religious attitudes, and thus their adherence to political liberalism or authoritarianism, and so on.⁵

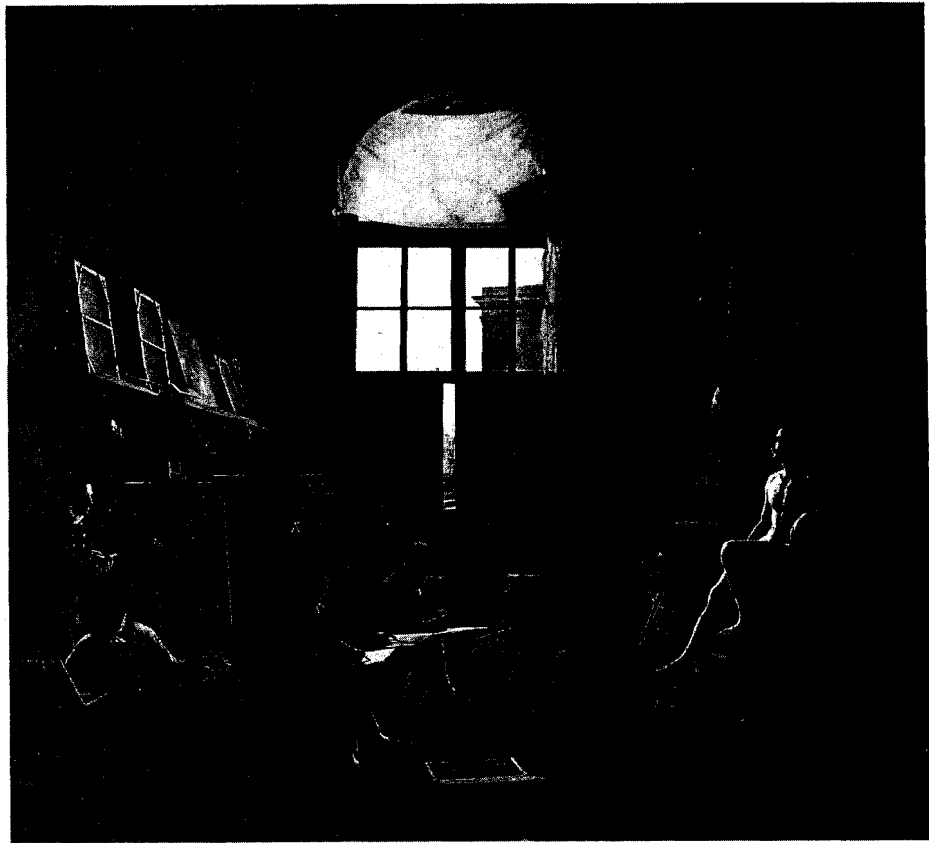
The social practices of art production and consumption cannot be isolated from other social practices. To the extent that all social practices are subject to change and to the influence of broader social transformations, so too will these be. Thus, discussion of the social practices of art can show how the task of understanding particular works of art may usefully be informed by broad concepts of social organization and change, such as the concept of modernity. On the one hand, specific works of art issue from practices of production and are the subject of practices of consumption; on the other hand, these practices are themselves constrained and determined by broader social formations and transformations, such as modernity. In turn, they may have reciprocal influence on them. We are saying that there may be aspects of 'aesthetic experience' that are elusive but a large part of such experience can be accounted for in terms of social and cultural factors.

Art practice and politics in the nineteenth-century art world

The idea that modern art begins in nineteenth-century France is a commonplace of art history, with which we shall not quarrel here. But those Modernists who argue that modern art attained a social autonomy are partly saying that the nature of art as a social practice changed radically during that century. Many of them privilege the importance of technical, formal and aesthetic changes, explaining them in terms of a 'self-critical' progression to an 'absolute', a 'pure art', an 'art for art's sake' (this is apparently achieved by an ever-refined specialization, which eradicates references external to the discipline itself). We would describe such changes differently, by considering the possibility of social concerns being among the primary causal factors.

⁵ On this, see T.J. Clark, 'Preliminaries to a possible treatment of *Olympia* in 1865'; and Griselda Pollock 'Modernity and the spaces of femininity'.

Plate 47 Léon Cochereau,
*L'Atelier de David au Collège des
 Quatre Nations (Interior of
 David's Studio)*, 1814,
 oil on canvas, 90 x 105 cm.
 Musée du Louvre, Paris.
 Photo: Réunion des Musées
 Nationaux Documentation
 Photographique.



entrusted to a new body, the Institut Français, which retained strong consultative powers with regard to the École des Beaux Arts (the State school). In 1816, a section of the Institute was renamed the *Académie*. It reinstated history painting in the grand manner – the *style historique* – representing scenes of Classical, biblical and contemporary history. The purpose was public edification, and the Academy ensured the suitability of the École curriculum to this end.

Academic artists were restricted in their choice of themes and subjects by the legacy of aristocratic notions of what was worthy of representation and how. This 'decorum' was encoded in a hierarchy of genres. History painting was thought more 'elevated' than portraiture, which in turn was more worthy than 'genre painting' (depicting the daily lives of ordinary people). Landscape was even lower, with still life bottom of the hierarchy. This scale of importance of subject ran parallel with a scale of required skill and expertise. The more serious the category of painting, the greater the expectation of expertise in drawing, and of complete and highly polished finish. Works in lesser genres could be tolerably sketchy in parts. These distinctions were also marked by differences of scale and format; an important painting would typically be a large one. Finally, certain subjects or themes – violence, the mob, popular crime, the less respectable vices and so on, would not be shown at all – or shown, as overt violence and sexual activity were, only in safely conventionalized (and typically mythological) contexts.

Until 1863, the curriculum of the École remained the narrow one of the eighteenth century, providing classes only in drawing, anatomy and perspective (see Plate 46), with the significant addition of classes in ancient history. The École itself did not teach *painting*, although many private *ateliers* run by established artists did (Plate 47). The premier annual art exhibition up to the 1880s was the Salon. This was organized by the Academy, but on behalf of the State (a major buyer), on State premises and at State expense. The Salon was the main public arena where artists were able to establish reputations.

Since the time of Louis XIV, culture had been a central arena for politics in French life. Painters producing work for aristocratic patrons wanted to secure prestige and status.

Academicians conceived of themselves as intellectuals, a status which aligned them with their prestigious patrons. This explains the Academy's emphasis on Classical and biblical learning and history painting, and is also the basis for its particular interest in drawing. Paradoxically, drawing was seen as a less manual task than painting. It was thought to give a more accurate representation of an artist's intellectual abilities, but another important factor was the emphasis on the concept of *dessin*. What was thought to characterize artists as intellectuals was their ability to *design* or *compose* a picture, to arrange or order the elements of a work in ways which clarified their relative importance, and highlighted the meanings of a work. 'Design' would be undertaken in sketches or *esquisses*, preparatory works, usually on a smaller scale and invariably much rougher in execution than a finished work. In the *esquisses*, the artist would first try out an idea, often attempting several different conceptions. The typical medium for the work of 'design' would be drawing (Plate 48), though colour sketches were sometimes made.

It's clear how the Academy fostered work such as Flandrin's *Theseus recognized by his Father* (Plate 49), which won the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1832. Emphasizing its claims as an intellectual institution, the Académie cultivated an art which was *erudite*. It implied Classical learning and the assimilation of a body of theoretical writing on art, concerned with such issues as the mechanics of story-telling, the Classical aesthetic questions concerning order, clarity, harmony, the edifying, and 'the beautiful', concepts that were perceived as central to the Greek and Roman tradition. In this way, the Academy sustained a complete ideology of art: a set of assumptions, beliefs and attitudes about what art should be, what made a painter an *artist*, where art fitted into society and what kind of society it fitted into. The Académie was a conservative body, both in art and politics.

Although temporarily abolished, the Académie survived the Revolution and became increasingly institutionalized, not least because the bourgeoisie wanted to perpetuate the illusion of aristocratic and superior French taste that was a necessary weapon in the growing mercantile competition with England and Germany. But just as the aristocracy of the nineteenth century was under challenge from bourgeois and intellectual adversaries, so too was the Academy subject to critiques. An important challenge came from the Romantics and from the painter Eugène Delacroix (Plate 54). Many Academics identified Delacroix with left-wing politics on the grounds of technique. His use of rich colour and 'painterly' and expressive visible brushwork contrasted with Academic taste, which disdained colouristic and painterly effect, because it was traditionally associated with 'emotion' and 'sensibility', both of which were regarded as 'feminine' and bereft of theoretical interest. This view had its roots in Academic debate, originating in the seventeenth



Plate 48 Hippolyte Flandrin,
Thésée reconnu par son père
(*Theseus Recognized by his Father*),
1832, pen and ink on paper,
20 x 27 cm. École National
Supérieur des Beaux-Arts, Paris.

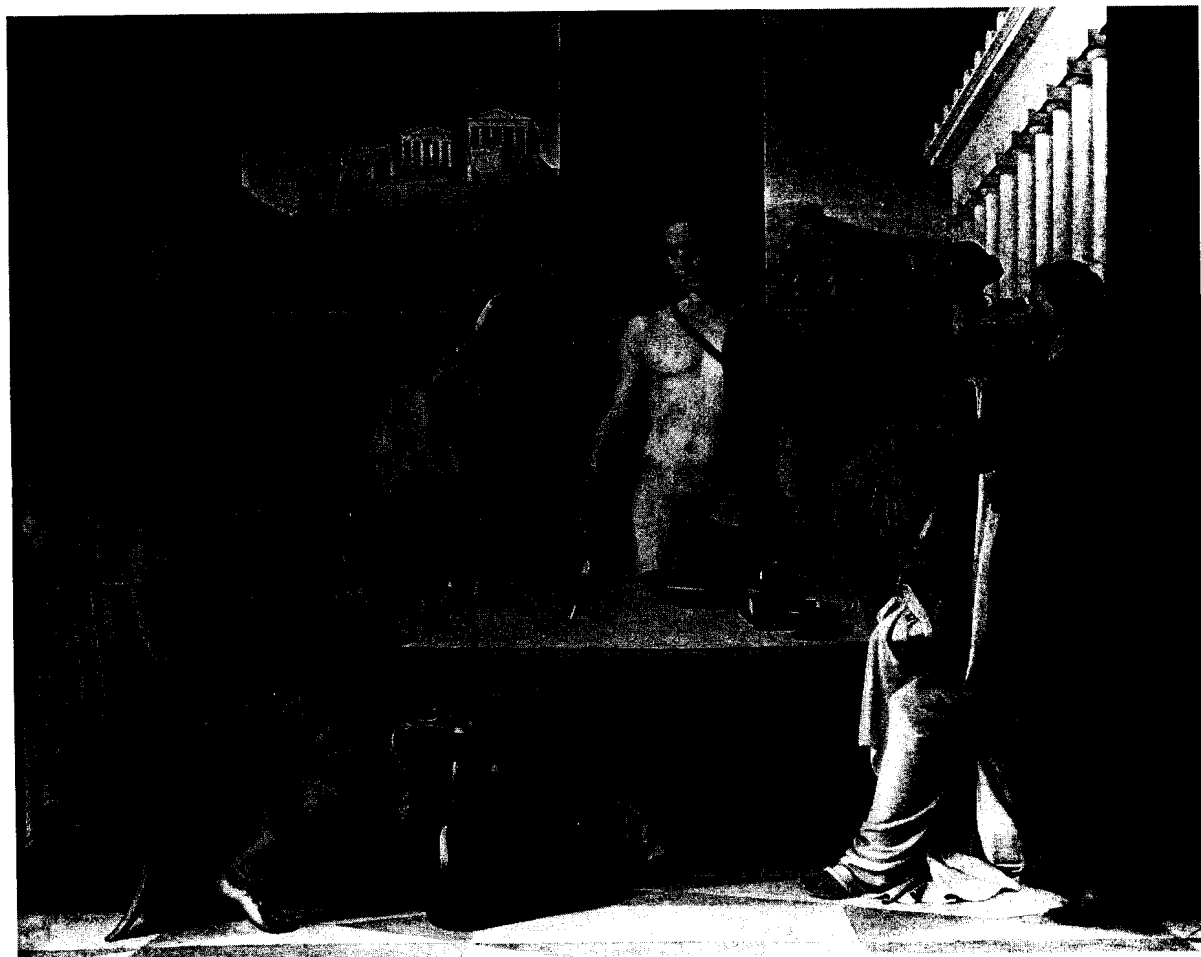


Plate 49 Hippolyte Flandrin, *Thésée reconnu par son père* (*Theseus Recognized by his Father*), 1832, oil on canvas, 115 x 146 cm. École national supérieur des Beaux-Arts, Paris

century, about the relative value of *dessin* (which was often regarded as signifying 'masculine' control) and of colour. For an Academic, colour traditionally served to do little more than 'fill in' a drawing and had scant value in its own right. The Academy was also committed to the value of a high finish, '*le fini*', a quality of painting which betrays little mark of the brush, while often revealing minute pictorial detail. This technique hid any trace of manual labour, redolent of proletarian craft originals. If many Academics (though not all) painted primarily for those who aspired to aristocratic values, those outside its purview, independents, catered to a large and varied audience including on the one hand bourgeois intellectuals and on the other a more sentimentalizing section of the middle class, the inheritors of an eighteenth-century cult of *sensibilité* ('sensitivity' – the cultivation of feeling, compassion, pity, the 'emotions').

After the 'Revolution' of 1830, the social context of these art practices began a radical shift. The 'July Monarchy' of Louis-Philippe focused new social forces in both political and economic life and fostered that major social transformation we call *modernization*. (In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the sociologist Max Weber described social modernization as the conjoint growth of the modern state and modern capitalism). The emergent State under Louis-Philippe was an explicitly bourgeois regime, fostering capitalist industrialization, technological innovation, trade and commerce on a new scale, thus sustaining an increasingly wealthy middle class. With wealth and state encouragement and patronage, this class gained influence and even power, both political and cultural. The new bourgeoisie of the 1820s and 1830s provided a large section of the heterogeneous audience for a third kind of art, the art of the *juste milieu* – the 'middle way', the 'ideal

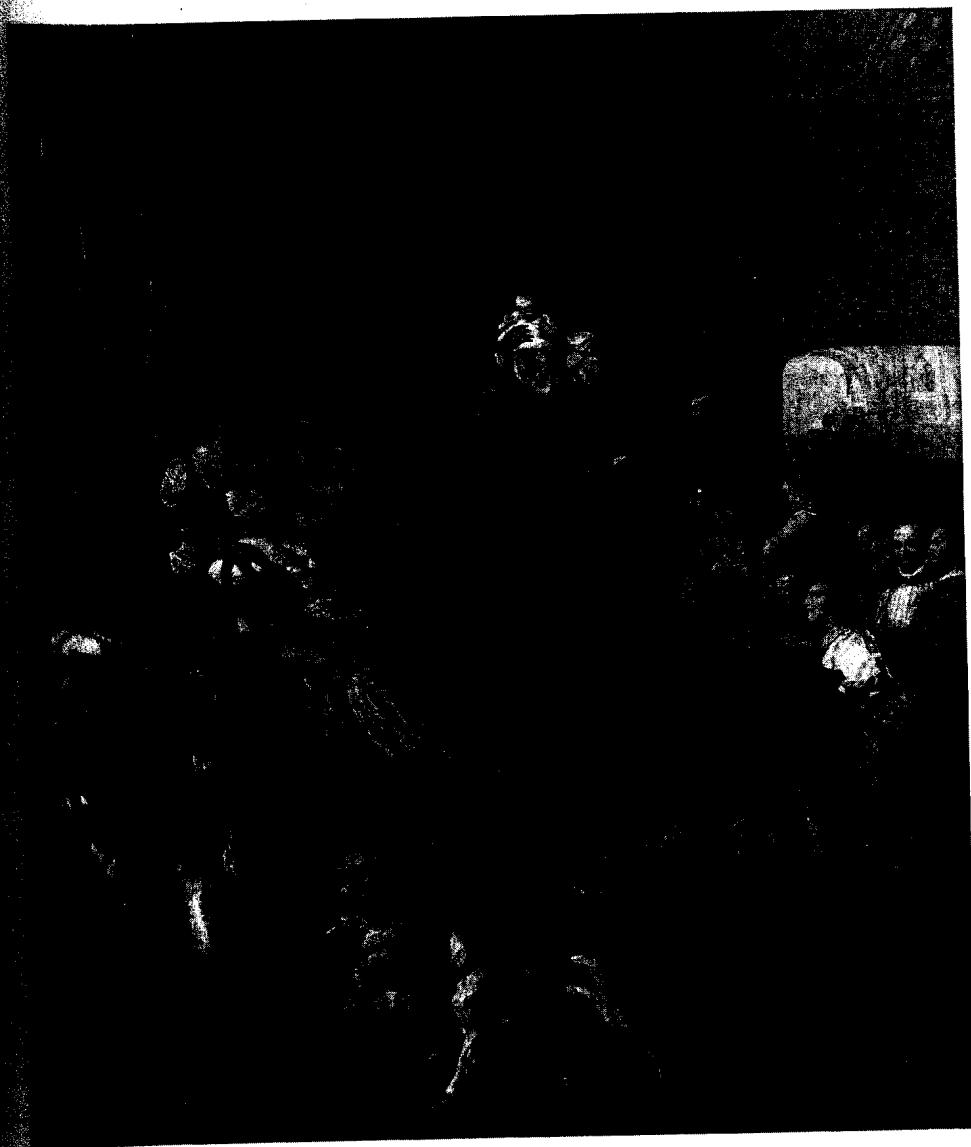


Plate 50 Eugène Delacroix,
*La Naissance de Henri IV au
 Château de Pau, le 13 Décembre
 1553 (The Birth of Henry IV)*,
 1827, oil on canvas,
 484 x 392 cm. Musée du Louvre.
 Photo: Réunion des Musées
 Nationaux Documentation
 Photographique.

compromise'. This is an art which satisfies expectations of competent drawing and modelling of forms, vivid expression in figures and faces, clear composition and lively storytelling. However, it forgoes any commitment to the Classical or the erudite for an interest in themes and emotions closer to those of the Romantics. Delacroix's *Birth of Henry IV* (Plate 50) is an early example of *juste milieu* painting.

Eclecticism and *juste milieu* painting

Juste milieu art – a tendency, not a style – was the 'official art' of the July Monarchy. *Juste milieu* works do not look particularly similar to each other (Plates 50, 51, 52 and 116). Their characteristics were negative – not consistently Classical and not unreservedly Romantic. But it might be asked why the official art did not develop a new tendency, instead of feeding off the Classic and Romantic. A peculiarity of the July Monarchy was its institutional commitment to the philosophy of eclecticism. The leading eclectic philosopher, Victor Cousin, rose to a high position in the administration, finally establishing almost autocratic dominance over the entire French educational system, including the *École des Beaux Arts*. Eclectics believed that progress could be advanced by a process of even-handed consideration of the validity of existing knowledge and systems of thought, by compounding the 'best' contributions of all past thinking into a single new synthesis. According to eclecticism, any art which took the 'best' from Classicism and Romanticism

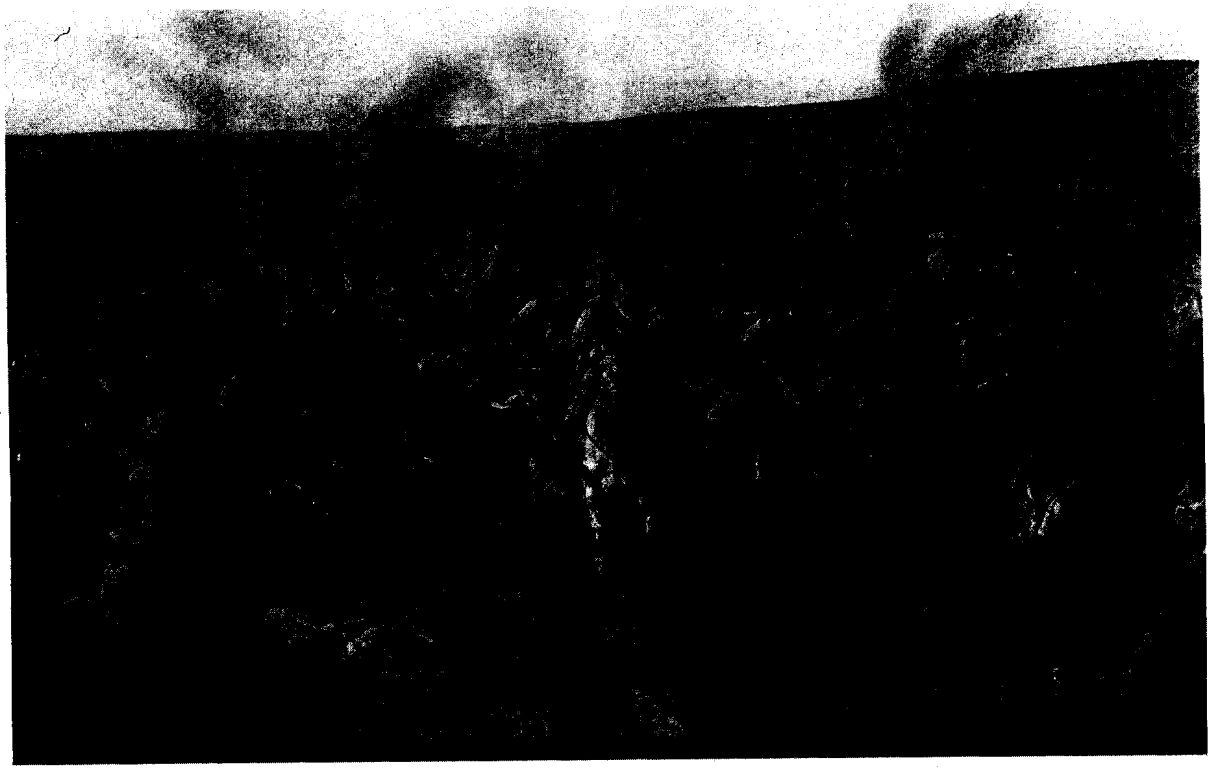


Plate 51 Émile-Jean-Horace Vernet, *Prise de Smalah* (*The Capture of Smalah*), 1845, Musée Historique, Versailles. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.

seemed bound to be superior to either. An example is Couture's *Romans of the Decadence* (Plate 53), which enjoyed major critical success at the 1847 Salon, because it could be read from different, 'eclectic' points of view. Eclecticism became the official philosophy. If this philosophy linked *juste milieu* painting politically to the government, socially it was connected with the bourgeoisie. Only the middle classes, it was argued, had both the education and the benign interests necessary to characterize and decide on the merits of past ideas and to make a synthesis of all that was best.

However, as Baudelaire suggested in the 'Salon of 1846' (the passage is quoted on p.81), the danger of official subjects, approved by the State, of eclecticism in every field, was shallow compromise; *juste milieu* painters such as Vernet and Delaroche fell into that danger (Plates 51, 52). For Baudelaire, Romanticism, and Delacroix in particular (Plate 54), was symbolic of a modern critical engagement with official values. In contrast to the *juste milieu* compromise, he looked for:

natural and living drama, terrible and melancholic drama, expressed often by colour, but always by gesture. ... In the matter of sublime gestures, Delacroix's only rivals are outside of his art ... It is because of this entirely modern and novel quality that Delacroix is the latest expression of progress in art.

(*Oeuvres complètes*, p.238)

Necessarily, our threefold division of the art world into Academic, *juste milieu* / official and independent is much oversimplified. Many painters and their works crossed borderlines. But our schema allows us to consider the co-existing place of these broadly differing kinds of art practice within the wider process of social modernization. Academic painting can be considered an art which is no longer explicitly responsive to contemporary culture but which still survives because it is rooted in past power structures. It is tempting to suggest that *juste milieu* painting appeals to and is supported by new dominant classes, that it is modern in the sense that it is recognisably 'contemporary'; Romantic art, the leading



Plate 52 Paul Delaroche, *L'Exécution de Lady Jane Grey* (*The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*), 1833, oil on canvas, 246 x 297 cm. The National Gallery, London. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees.

Independent tendency, was perceived by critics such as Baudelaire as 'oppositional', and may be linked to classes and sub-groups not yet empowered.

While these suggestions conceal important complexities they enable us to recognize two important points. The first is that the interests of the Académie, the École and the Salon were not synonymous, and that these institutions were sites for the articulation of political difference in French society, in so far as culture was a central arena for such differentiation. Secondly, it is necessary to distinguish between Academic art, with its legacy of 'noble' and intellectually 'elevating' subjects from religious, Classical and mythological sources, and 'official art', with its emphasis on contemporary interests, even when using historical themes. The *juste-milieu* was a form of 'modern art' which responded to modern conditions, to a society newly characterized by eclectic individualism. We'd argue that eclectic individualism is inseparable from the interests and development of capitalism, where the pursuit of 'modernization' and the market economy relies on the ideology of individual choice and the production of 'diverse' commodities, the demand for which is fuelled by this ideology.

In the following case studies we wish to examine this thesis. The nineteenth-century capitalist controlled impressive new powers of production – new material technologies, new technologies of management and consequently new kinds of knowledge and abilities, all oriented to extracting value more exhaustively from an ever wider range of sources. Both more wealth and more people come under the domination of capitalism, and the

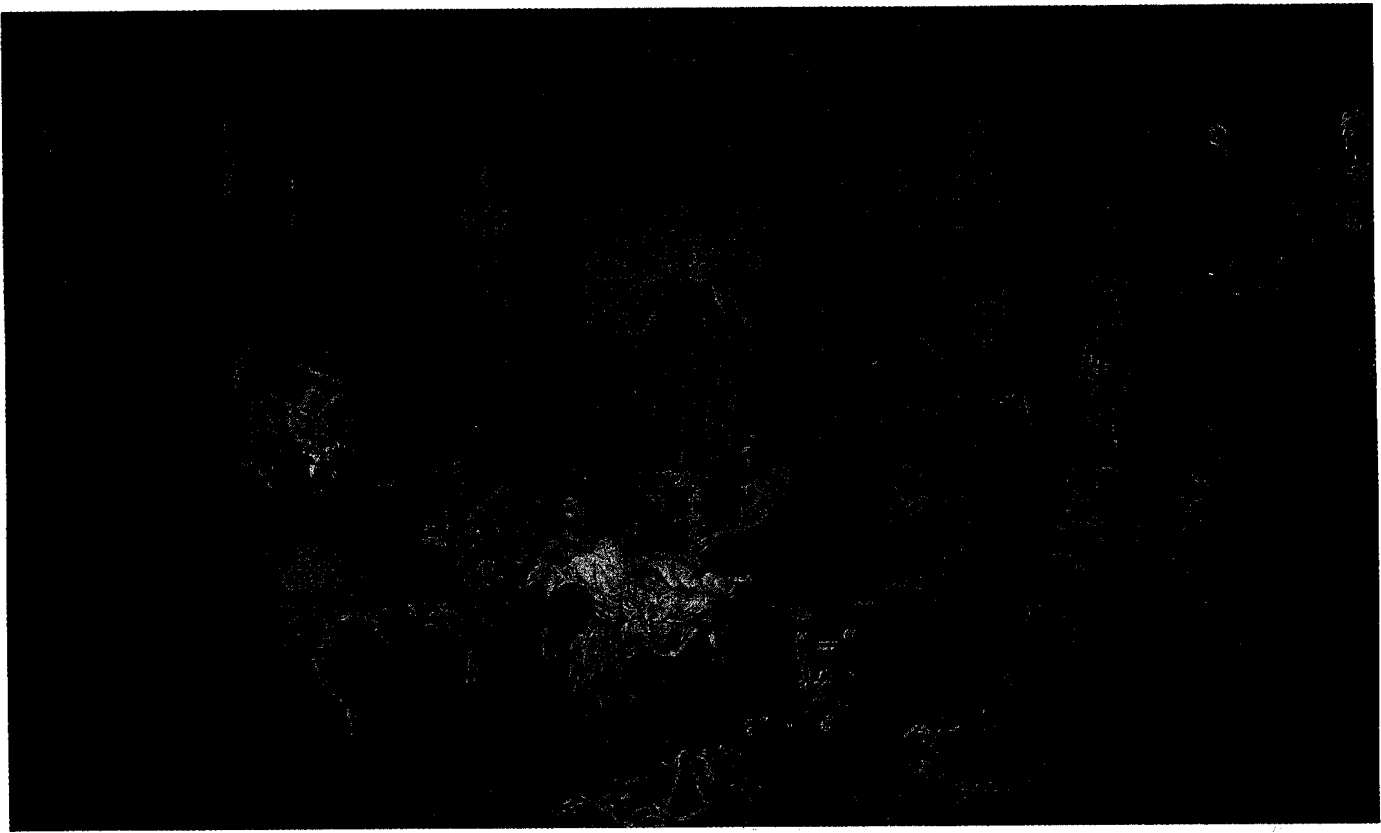


Plate 53 Thomas Couture, *Les Romains de la décadence* (*Romans of the Decadence*), 1847, oil on canvas, 466 x 775 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.

capitalist (the industrialist, financial speculator, the entrepreneur, dealer etc.), especially after 1848 and the Second Empire of Napoleon III, eventually assumed the dominant role in politics and human relations:

the economic development of the country was a major preoccupation under Napoleon III ... The economic side of the despotism was complete economic control over public works and their financing, and government approval for the appointment of the directors of all large companies and the formation of new businesses open to public subscription. In this way, there was central economic planning and control. Financiers and industrialists acquired a new prestige ... Napoleon III did not worry about great capitalists becoming too powerful ...

(T. Zeldin, *France 1848–1945: Politics and Anger*, pp.188–9)

In the human sphere, capitalism engendered an ever more diverse network of interlocking talents and abilities, attitudes and expectations, social sub-cultures and forms of life, of which Bohemianism is an example. In such a society, *differences*, such as of taste, fashion and style, have to be cultivated, but it helps the *system* greatly if they can be managed and integrated in the interests of finance capital and the production and consumption of commodities – such as the products of the art world. For example in the boom conditions of the 1850s, the activities of the Hôtel Drouot, an auction house,

marked a shift in modes of consumption, with an increased emphasis on speculation and investment. Physical proximity to the stock exchange [the Bourse] encouraged analogies with the fortunes of finance capital. By the 1860s, light-hearted accounts by Henri Rochefort and Champfleury were evoking a stock exchange of art objects and drawing comparisons to a gambling house with collectors as 'roulette players'.

(N. Green, 'Circuits of Production, Circuits of Consumption', p.32)



Plate 54 Eugène Delacroix, *Liberté guidant le peuple* (*Liberty Guiding the People*), 1831, oil on canvas, 260 x 325 cm. Louvre, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.

Industrial capitalism promotes what has been called *normalization*. It generates individuality, but only insofar as individuals contribute usefully to the whole. Recalcitrants and would-be rebels are 'normalized', their 'oppositional' characteristics discouraged, if not repressed, while their useful ones are developed, trained and harnessed to the needs of capitalist society. As Baudelaire noted, the Romantics had tried to resist this by taking a critical attitude to accepted artistic conventions and to official subjects, sometimes by producing history paintings on modern life subjects. One example is Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, 1819, which represents a scandalous incident which the government attempted to cover up; another is Delacroix's *Liberty Guiding the People* (Plate 54).⁷

However, in critically engaging with their own themes and subjects, which, unlike commissioned works, were openly for sale, the Romantics also contributed to the birth of the modern market in art dealing. Such a market requires an individualistic form of society in which to flourish. A typical characteristic of the kind of modern art that is critical of established norms and power relations is its uneasy but indissoluble relationship with the luxury market. Thus Romanticism, as a form of individual 'opposition', is impossible

⁷ Géricault's work was based on an incident when a Navy flagship was wrecked off Senegal; 150 people were opportunistically cast adrift on a flimsy raft by a royalist captain and only fifteen survived appalling conditions including cannibalism.

except in a modern society where novelty is encouraged but robbed of its critical function by the process of normalization in which art becomes a marketable commodity. *Juste milieu* is perhaps a more typical product of such a modern society and feeds off normalization. It robs both Romanticism and the 'elevated' Classicism of Academic art of their critical potency. Both are reduced to sets of styles and typical subjects, which can be reshuffled without regard to their original ideological functions. The final product is no longer a source of values and knowledge which might be opposed to those of capitalist society, but a synthesis of attitudes enabling spectators from diverse political persuasions to read whatever they wished.

'Modern art', whatever that may be, has frequently been discussed as if it were somehow the natural artistic manifestation of modern society. Such accounts have often taken a form known as *reflectionist*, because they treat art as a passive mirror of society. But reflectionism overlooks the important possibility that art can be related to modernity in *more than one way*. We have seen two ways so far: Romanticism is impossible except in a modern society, but *juste milieu* is perhaps its more typical product.

Courbet: Representing the country to the town

Out of social tensions centred around the 1848 Revolution came the possibility of art occupying new territory in relation to the world of official art institutions and the viewing public, and by extension, in relation to society at large. Courbet is an example of an artist who found that since art had an established political weight in mid-nineteenth-century France, he could be politically active in society, to some small degree, by operating within the art world. This is the kind of relationship we mean by 'avant-gardism'.

This new relationship was never self-consciously designed, either by Courbet or anyone else. We can consider some of the social conditions that fostered the possibilities for establishing an avant-garde tradition by looking at specific examples of Courbet's work.

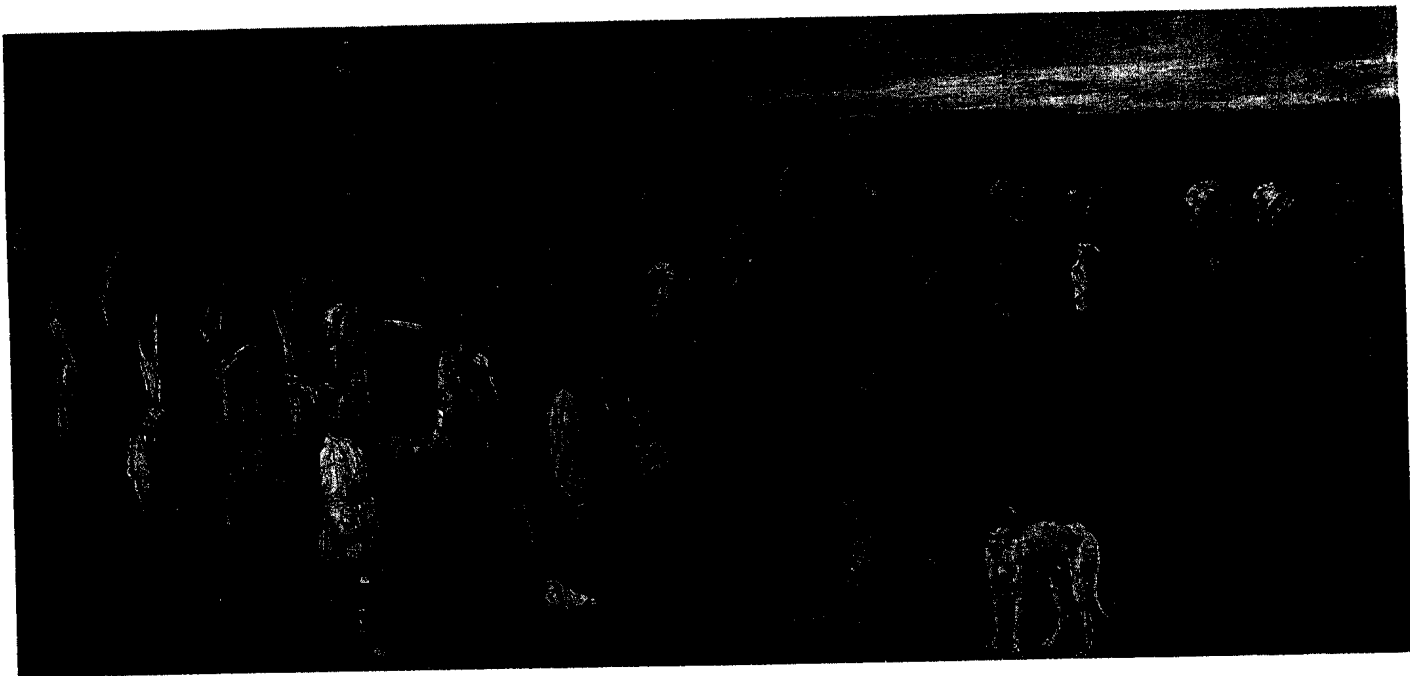


Plate 55 Gustave Courbet, *Un Enterrement à Ornans* (Burial at Ornans), 1849–50, oil on canvas, 314 x 663 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Gift of Miss Juliette Courbet 1881.
Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.