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MUSEUMS

The Wisdom Of the Greeks

By MAUREEN MULLARKEY

Lucien Febvre, co-founder of the journal *Annales*, was fond of repeating: "History, science of the past, science of the present." The formula was shorthand for his insistence that society in all its complexity, including contemporary society, could be grasped only within the living tension between time spans. The *longue durée* corrects our hasty awareness and illumines our own brief cultural moment.

"The Legacy of Homer: Four Centuries of Art From the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris" is a dazzling project of historical understanding enlivened by love and connoisseurship. First exhibited last year in Paris, this rare show is divided between the Dahesh Museum of Art and Princeton University Art Museum. Its goals are unabashedly pedagogical: to tell the tale of the Trojan War ("Iliad") and the voyages of Ulysses ("Odyssey"); to illustrate the history of art teaching in Paris; and to record various interpretations of Homer in France from the 17th to the early 20th century.

Ambitious in scope and scale, the exhibition necessitates joint presentation. Its range of media is impressive: large paintings and sculptural reliefs, delectable small oil sketches and bas-reliefs, freestanding sculpture. All were selected from the collection of the Ecole, one of the finest in France. Jacques-Louis David's magnificent "Andromache Mourning Hector" (1783), usually on loan to the Louvre, is at the Dahesh, along with many other 19th-century works. Earlier artists, such as Poussin and Ingres, are at Princeton.

From its founding in 1648, the Académie Royale and its successor, the Ecole, founded its curriculum on classical culture. Instruction was built a series of competitions that concluded in the grand prix de l'Académie Royale, which entitled the winner to a coveted sojourn at the French Academy in Rome. Contestants were assigned a classical theme for interpretation and completion within the allotted time: 12 hours for an oil sketch; one month for full realization on a larger scale.

The Prix de Rome jury of 1872 specified the subject of Ajax defying the gods: "Minerva having sunk Ajax's fleet near the rocks of Caphareus ... the intrepid warrior gained the safety of a rock and arrogantly declared: 'I shall escape despite the gods.' He was struck down on the instant by a thunderbolt." Action, setting, and psychological keynote were fixed. The young artist had to materialize them with every tool at his command, chief among them drawing and composition.

The pre-eminence of drawing as a critical component of painting is one of the exhibition's deepest pleasures. Academicians were expected to draw the figure by memory as Joshua Reynolds prescribed — as easily as writing the alphabet — and the conceptual rigor and power over materials exhibited here is breathtaking. It is also a warning light: Feeble M.F.A. requirements confer an artistic identity regardless of skills. Nemesis has more than one way to snuff Ajax.

And some are good fun. Nineteen lithographs from Honoré Daumier's raucous series "Ancient History," spoofing Homeric characters, are displayed in a 19th-century cabinet with revolving, double-sided frames. Such images suit comedy more than the gravity of history painting, and never made the grade as worthy assignments. But Daumier took his cue for burlesque in part from Homer himself, who, at one point in the "Iliad," likens Ajax the Great to a donkey stubbornly holding his ground while being hit with rocks by children. In Daumier's series, a fat Helen walks arm in arm with smug, paunchy Menelaus and thumbs her nose in victory at the Academy and its

clientele.

The series is a telling introduction to the visible decline of history painting. The genre slowly, inexorably began to reflect the prejudices of the newly enriched Second Empire rather than an intelligently imagined past. Compare Fournier's stagey "The Wrath of Achilles" (1881) to the powerful simplicity of Hillemacher's sober depiction of "Hecuba Discovering the Corpse of Her Son Polydorus"(1840).

No mere exercise in cultural archaeology, the exhibition speaks to our own moment. At the Dahesh, stay a while with Jules-Joseph Lefebvre, who won the Prix de Rome in 1861 with "The Death of Priam." In this tableau of Homeric theodicy, Pyrrhus, Achilles's bloodthirsty son, kills Priam's last son in front of him at the altar of Zeus the Protector, where Priam and his family have taken refuge. The painting is theatrically lit, and the spotlight is on the brute splendor of Pyrrhus and the aged anatomy of the doomed Trojan king who hates all war. In the darkened wings, elderly Hecuba, mother of Priam's slain sons, is taken into slavery. A burnt offering still smolders on the altar in caustic mimicry of Troy burning in the background.

Pyrrhus's sacrilege prompts thought of other crimes in sacred places: the murders of Thomas Becket and Archbishop Romero at the altar, the massacre of Polish Jews in the Krasnosielc synagogue, the slaughter of Rwandans in churches. We cannot count them all. Greek epic genius explored the ways of gods toward man and of men toward one another, examining the bones of human suffering with a lucidity that is basic to every humane precept the West has given the world.

Yale University Press has produced a glorious catalog, with magisterial essays by George Steiner, Philippe S  n  chal, and Emmanuel Schwartz, curator of the Ecole's collection. Mr. Schwartz combines erudition with the wry familiarity of a parent. He knows his brood and comments with vivacious affection and a clear eye for the difference between copybook diligence and inspired handling. Mr. Steiner's preface is particularly welcome. His "In Bluebeard's Castle" (1971) was famous for its post-Holocaust despair over the apparent failure of the humanities to humanize. But Mr. Steiner knows better than most that the West cannot live on nothing. Cultures older and sterner than our own watch our dwindling inheritance and wait.

"The Legacy of Homer" at the Dahesh Museum of Art until January 22 (580 Madison Avenue, 212-759-1235) and the Princeton University Art Museum until January 15 (Princeton, N.J., 609-258-3788).



Jules-Joseph Lefebvre, 'The Death of Priam' (1861). **DAHESH MUSEUM OF ART**

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