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Art Review | 'The Legacy of Homer'

Triumphant Greeks From the Academy

By [GRACE GLUECK](#)

Whatever his other virtues, the Greek hero Odysseus was not Mr. Nice Guy. As recounted in Virgil's "Aeneid," he succeeded, with Diomedes, a comrade in arms during the Trojan War, in stealing the statue of Pallas Athena, which so long as it remained within Troy's walls was said to make the city invincible. But as Diomedes carried off the small statue, known as the palladium, Ulysses, wanting sole credit for the feat, tried to stab him in the back.

Returning to the Greek camp, Diomedes made his assailant walk ahead of him while he strained to look back, in fear of Trojan pursuit. The incident was commemorated in 1842 by the now-obscure French sculptor Pierre-Jules Cavelier (1814-94) in a musclebound plaster statue about two-thirds life size; it depicts Diomedes alone, his noble face peering apprehensively over his right shoulder, as he cradles the palladium.

The work, "Diomedes Carrying Off the Palladium," won Cavelier the Prix de Rome in sculpture for that year, one of the several annual awards in various disciplines given by the École des Beaux-Arts, the pompous, tradition-oriented French national art academy that began in 1648 and still exists. For centuries it turned out the academic artists prized by the French government. As a winner of the prize, Cavelier was entitled to spend a salaried three-to-five years at the Villa Medici in Rome, studying Greek, Roman and Renaissance masterpieces and looking forward to a lucrative official career.

"Diomedes" is among 130 works on view in "The Legacy of Homer: Four Centuries of Art From the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris," divided between two American institutions, the Dahesh Museum of Art in New York and the Princeton University Art Museum in Princeton, N.J. The show, with works by Poussin, Ingres, David and other stars, among many lesser-knowns, was organized by Emmanuel Schwartz, curator in chief of the patrimony at the École.

He made his selections from the hoard of more than 600 Prix de Rome-winning and "reception pieces" - works required from Prix de Rome winners who aspired to membership in the French Academy, which governed the École - amassed over the centuries. Many of the works have been in storage since the 1968 student uprising in Paris forced educational reforms and the abandonment of the 320-year-old Prix de Rome in the visual arts.

The high-minded École, tuned in to the classical past, often assigned to its students themes from idolized Greek and Roman texts: Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey," Virgil's "Aeneid" and others. It is an undisputed fact that the battles and personal dramas conjured up in poetry by the ancient bards have maximum visual potential. And the students, who were taught by the school's rigid pedagogy a repertory of facial expressions and body language, exploited that potential to the fullest. Attitudinizing; sinewy, sexy physiques; swordplay; wailings, weepings and gnashing of teeth! Eat your heart out, [Steven Spielberg](#). The two-part show puts the school's art of the 17th and 18th centuries, by and large,

at Princeton, while the Dahesh displays paintings, sculptures, drawings and prints from the 19th century, in keeping with its focus. Both shows include competition paintings and sculptures for the Prix de Rome, reception pieces and small preliminary oil sketches and plaster reliefs from the earlier elimination rounds of these contests.

A highlight of the Dahesh show is Jacques-Louis David's "Andromache Mourning Hector" (1783), a monumental painting that depicts the body of Hector, the best and most humane Trojan warrior, killed in combat by Achilles, the greatest Greek fighter, laid out in his palace, a laurel wreath crowning his head; his sword and helmet alongside the bier. His wife, Andromache, sits by his side, one arm outstretched to touch his, the other holding their son Astyanax between her knees. Her face is theatrically turned away from both, gazing beseechingly upward.

The painting, David at his stagiest, reflects admiration for the old masters digested by David in Rome. It is the reception piece he submitted, on finally winning the Prix in 1784 after three successive failures that almost brought about his suicide. His Prix winner, "Erasistratus Discovers the Cause of His Illness (Antiochus and Stratonice)," a romantic royal saga not related to the Homeric theme, is shown at Princeton with his oil sketch for it.

A footnote here: David, who became artistic director of the new Revolutionary government under Napoleon, succeeded in having the Royal Academy banished in 1793 and reorganized the École's instruction in a more liberal direction. (The academy was later reinstated.) And although he withdrew "Andromache" from the École's possession, it was later returned by his heirs.

Another aspect of Hector's death, the grief of his aging father, Priam, King of Troy, is dealt with in paintings by two artists, separated by almost three generations, one at each museum. Each work is titled "Priam at the Feet of Achilles," and each has rather similar compositional elements. Each shows Achilles reclining half-naked in his camp tent as he receives the supplicant figure of Priam, who kneels at the warrior's feet to beg for his son's body.

At the Dahesh, the earlier painting (1809), by Jérôme-Martin Langlois, looks more like a shadowy biblical scene out of Rembrandt; with Achilles' figure highlighted to reveal a compassionate expression on his Neo-Classical face.

At Princeton, the painting by Joseph Wencker (1876) shows both figures in a clearer light. But here Achilles' face, with a tear starting from his eye, is much more individualized; he establishes a distinct rapport with the aged figure below, and the painting has far more emotional impact.

Achilles is more coolly represented in the Princeton show by one of David's star pupils, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, whose deliciously campy painting, "Achilles Receives the Ambassadors of Agamemnon" (1801), is said to be the most famous work composed by a student while still attending the École. It portrays the Greek leader, nude except for a cloth that swaddles his loins, interrupted while strumming his lyre. His friend and lover Patroclus (later killed by Hector) stands assertively by his side, nude too except for a dashing helmet. A delegation has come from Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae and commander of the Greek expedition to Troy, to persuade Achilles, who had pulled his troops from the war for lack of conviction about its outcome, to take up arms again. The painting, an essay in bodies and stances, is already notable for the suave draftsmanship that would become Ingres's forte.

But with these and a few other exceptions most of the works in the show, though technically skilled,

emptily reprise the stratagems and histrionics of old master works from Italy and points north.

At the Dahesh, though, the 20th century is amusingly saluted with a painting by Georges-Antoine Rochegrosse, "Le Bal des Quat'z Arts Descending the Champs-Élysées," from around 1904. It's a takeoff on the Four Arts Ball, an elaborate costume gala first organized by École students in 1893 and held annually through 1966. Its participants paraded through Paris in a sendup of the school and its academic ideas. The painting depicts the rollicking atmosphere of the parade, which brings together characters from the history painting the school held in such high esteem: Greeks sporting shields or Spartan helmets, Japanese samurai rattling weapons, Renaissance pages, Assyrians driving chariots, an anonymous muse flying through the air.

Yet there is a true masterpiece here, on view at both museums: a set of lithographs titled "Ancient History" by Honoré Daumier that wickedly send up the academic love of antiquity. Published between 1841 and 1843 in the satirical journal *Le Charivari*, they project a refreshing new view of the revered idols of myth and legend. In one, a fat, slovenly Helen, in myth the beautiful cause of the Trojan War, trots behind her lordly husband, Menelaus, thumbing her nose at him; in another, a harried Thetis, sea-goddess mother of Achilles, holds the bawling, squirming infant by one heel as she dips him into the River Styx to confer immortality. Wouldn't you know, the heel she held him by, untouched by the water, was his undoing.

"The Legacy of Homer: Four Centuries of Art From the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris" continues at the Dahesh Museum of Art, 580 Madison Avenue, at 56th Street, Manhattan, (212) 759-0606, through Jan. 22, and at the Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, N.J., (609) 258-3788, through Jan. 15.