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It's Kitsch (Not That There's Anything Wrong With That)

The Dahesh Museum specializes in 19th century European academic art, the kind of art that is still regularly reviled and ridiculed. In a large features article that appeared in the New York Times in 2004, writer Joe Queenan called the Dahesh the “Museum of Bad Art,” and claimed that the main service it was able to provide was that it “gave the viewer a chance to chuckle.” He then went on to give his thesaurus quite a workout, deploying the following words in an heroic effort to tell us exactly how he feels about this art: “Hideous,” “ghastly,” “phony,” “mechanical,” “ludicrous,” “mawkish,” “corny,” “over-the-top,” “awful,” “spectacularly overwrought,” “preposterously silly,” “uncompromising twaddle.”

By the early to mid 20th century, this reaction to academic art had already become dogma; and although not always expressed with such enthusiastic venom, it was the only acceptable opinion to hold according to the dominant critics and arbiters for whom the apotheosis of art was Modernism.

Most accounts of 19th-century European art, whether textual, in museums, or in the classroom, tell a selective tale of struggle and opposition, featuring artists who, by rejecting the past, forged a seemingly inevitable path forward. This path ultimately led to Modernism, a movement, style, and belief system that dominated the 20th century, and whose champions often reduced to mere obsolescent obstacles those other artists and institutions—broadly known as academic—that did not follow its trajectory.

At the Dahesh Museum, we aren't trying to stage a coup on high Modernism, or to topple its heroes and elevate artists like Bouguereau over Van Gogh. Rather, we would like to acknowledge and introduce our audience to the complex practices, theories and

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relationships that defined the art world in Europe, providing not only a fuller appreciation of those artists whose work has been marginalized, but also a broader art historical context within which to understand the entire period.

In doing so, I think that our project actually comes a bit closer to a kind of postmodern investigation, in that by exposing these artists and their works to serious scholarly and aesthetic inquiry, we are challenging assumptions like the existence of an absolute canon of masterpieces, or the concept of innate, unschooled genius, or by holding up as valuable—in many senses of the word—things such as pictorial illusionism, narrative, historicism, and appropriation, which Modernism had stripped of value, or indeed, challenging the assumption that today, there should even be such a rigid value distinction made between what is now considered the “high” art of the 19th century—Courbet, Manet, Monet, Gauguin, for instance, and those academic works that are now routinely designated as kitsch, the artistic equivalent of garden gnomes, ceramic figurines of Elvis, and Venus de Milo clocks.

Before continuing I want to answer to the question what do I mean by academic art? Who or what am I referring to?

Here are two prime examples of it from our permanent collection, *The Water Girl* by Adolphe-William Bouguereau (1885) and *Oedipus and the Sphinx* by Francois Fabre (1808). Both of these works, which nearly bracket the century chronologically, epitomize the hallmarks of academic painting in 19th century France, which was the period and place most closely associated with academic art as it is considered both pejoratively and as an historical category. Simply put, it is painting produced according to the precepts of an academy, products of an organized training system consecrated to perpetuating a particular manner in style and subject matter (not unlike the MFA programs at RISD and Yale). At the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris (the school for the French Academy), the emphasis was on technical ability and flawless execution. Learning to draw, especially the human figure, was the curriculum’s foundation. Clear,

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legible compositions were highly prized, as was an enamel-like finish. This so-called “licked finish,” in which evidence of the brushstroke was suppressed, was synonymous with the academic manner.

Ingres, one of the most significant academic painters of the 19th century had this to say about the brushstroke:

“...as accomplished as it may be, it should not be visible: otherwise it prevents the illusion, immobilizes everything. Instead of the object represented, it calls attention to the process: instead of the thought it betrays the hand.”

Of course, the inversion of this academic principle was one of the key ruptures of Modernism, and Clement Greenberg was its primary theorist. The obvious brushstroke was ever more privileged as visible evidence of the artist’s creative hand while it also served to emphasize the materiality of the paint and by extension, the flatness of its support. Illusionistic pictorial space was increasingly negated, as were the recognizable figures and narrative content that used to be contained within these fictive spaces. Advanced art became, for Greenberg and his acolytes, synonymous with abstraction.

In addition to this particular technique of painting, academic art adhered to a very specific roster of subjects. Academies were initially founded in the Renaissance as a way to break with the guild system, to establish painting as a fine art, not a craft, something achieved by a gentleman of education and intellect to serve learned patrons with the same level of refinement, as opposed to the handiwork done by an artisan or mere craftsman. It’s interesting to note, as an aside, that academic art was thus founded in a sense on the division between high and low, or fine art and craft. Greenberg would later posit that the highly refined academic technique itself, with its emphasis on the licked finish was, in the end, only craft, a way out of the tensions and nervousness of real decision-making in art.

Thus the academy elevated what they called history painting—subjects drawn from classical history, mythology, or religion—to the top of their thematic hierarchy.

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Francois-Xavier Fabre, *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, 1806-08

Landscape, still life, genre scenes—all of these were much lower in the academic hierarchy, as they did not communicate as well as history painting the humanistic ideals that the academy felt to be the most significant subjects for art.

But by the late 19th century, history painting as had been promoted and codified by the academy—mythology, ancient history, etc., had fallen out of favor at Salon exhibitions and in the newly expanding art marketplace, where a burgeoning wealthy upper and middle class of collectors sought imagery whose references were less obscure or erudite.

Anecdotalized history, landscapes, and humorous genre scenes, all became popular subjects, but it is important to note that most of this painting still aspired to a kind of transparent, smooth surface. The so-called licked finish transcended even subject matter as a key ingredient of academic style.

This painting by Bouguereau is a perfect summation of this transition to an easier kind of image that still echoed its classical pedigree. Comparing it to Ingres' well-known painting of a classical water nymph, *The Source* (1856) you can see how Bouguereau retained the classical form and just dressed it as an idealized peasant girl.

Bouguereau, *The Water Girl*, 1885

Ingres, *The Source*

In addition to all that historical background, there's the other, more subjective meaning embodied by the term academic art.

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Basically, it has referred to any art contemporaneous with, but outside of, what has become modern tradition, i.e. it is “anti-Impressionism” or “anti-modernism;” it is the traditional or conservative, as opposed to the new and radical.

Here is a standard comparison:

Bouguereau, Bathers

Cezanne, Bathers

It is thus considered by many to be like the betamax of the art world, or the clumsy cassette tape whose usefulness and appeal appeared, certainly by the early 20th century, to have been thoroughly routed by triumphant Modernism. As writer Peter Schjeldahl put it in a review of one of our exhibitions, (a good review, actually), academic art is “the biggest single item of road kill ever—a woolly mammoth peaceably rotting—along the highway of art history.”

And although exhibitions at the Dahesh Museum are regularly reviewed, the reviews usually make a point of emphasizing the museum’s perceived reactionary status in this most modern of cities:

In the New York Times, for example, the museum has been called “an unabashed outpost of arriere-garde art in a city that constantly strops its cutting edge.”

We have established ourselves as “a kind of New York hospitality center for the 19th century arriere-garde.”

And as summed up by Michael Kimmelman, in an article naming our exhibition on French artists in Rome one of the top 10 exhibitions in 2003, the Dahesh Museum of Art is “an oddly endearing fixture in town, a boon to serious students of 19th century art and fans of kitsch alike.”

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And there's the word that we've all come to discuss tonight: kitsch. Since Clement Greenberg's authoritative pronouncement in his essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*: "All kitsch is academic, and conversely, all that is academic is kitsch," it seems nearly impossible to mention academic art without also using the word kitsch.

It turned up in the New York Times review of our very first exhibition in 1995 in a two sentence passage that hits every anti-academic talking point: "With their vacuous subjects and splashy brushwork, these salon paintings have the very special awfulness of expensive kitsch. They were examples of exactly the kind of virtuosic hack work that sent younger painters like Monet and Renoir scurrying in the opposite direction."

Another critic writing more recently about the Dahesh Museum in general lamented the "kitschy resurgence" that academic art has made in the last 15 years.

Others weren't quite so upset about the perceived resurgence of academic art, kitschy or not. Several years ago, the Dahesh Museum put in a bid to purchase 2 Columbus Circle, which had been built by architect Edward Durrell Stone in what is now perceived as a very early example of postmodern design. It was built to house millionaire Huntington Hartford's own idiosyncratic collection of anti-modern, representational art, which he wanted to oppose to MOMA. The Dahesh seemed to some, including architecture critic Herbert Muschamp, to be the perfect new owner.

For Muschamp, both the building --which was famously called a "die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollipops"--and academic painting, were both examples of very likable things refused by modernism--which he claimed is generally in the business of not liking things. He looked forward to the possibility of being able to enjoy academic paintings on view again, albeit as a guilty pleasure.

Some more open-minded critics readily admit to the guilty pleasures academic painting offers. This large painting by Bouguereau called the *Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs*,

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which displays the painter's tremendous and indisputable skill at representing the human form in action within a very specific mythological narrative, was described by Kimmelman as "a remarkable picture if you can stand it."

And of paintings by Jean-Leon Gerome, another Times critic noted, with all the resignation of someone shocked to find themselves craving Hersheys over Valhrona chocolate: "Even if we think we should know better than to be taken in by such polished sexist and ethnocentric confections, they are hard to resist."

For the majority of contemporary critics, however, academic painting and its subject matter are by definition kitsch, asserted to be so without explanation or qualification. In a review of our Jean-Leon Gerome exhibition several years ago in *The New Yorker*, a magazine that itself was described by Clement Greenberg in 1939 as "high-class kitsch for the luxury trade," they recommended—or rather dismissed—the show as being "for those whose taste in kitsch runs to mosques, muezzins, harem girls, and the like."

Gerome is known for his mastery of the virtually seamless painting technique of academic art, a nearly photographic transparency that well served his desire for ethnographic and architectural accuracy, and while the sexist and colonialist overtones of some of his Orientalist imagery is well-documented, I find this reviewer's reflexive designation of the subject matter of mosques, etc. as kitsch to be rather interesting, as I'm sure that he would not designate as kitsch contemporaneous photographs of mosque interiors with praying figures. And, in a more direct comparison, if your taste in kitsch runs to harem girls, why wouldn't it be equally satisfied by Matisse's paintings of nude odalisques?

One answer can be found in a New York Times review of a show we did several years ago of British painting, the headline of which blared "In It's Victorian Glory, A World of Kitsch." The reviewer went on to say, very begrudgingly, that although the exhibition was "awash in the high-camp flummery of a 19th century Royal Academy exhibition, it is

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not without some redeeming esthetic values.” But what are these values? Not surprisingly, this painting by Albert Moore called *Midsummer*, was deemed a “knockout with its ‘modern’ flat patterning and its brilliant orchestration of a deep salmon color for the gowns and décor.” Clem would have been proud, as this echoes the praise he reserved for the avant-garde in his essay: “The excitement of their art seems to lie most of all in its pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors, etc, to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors.”

In a review of a recent exhibition, critic Roberta Smith used a similar strategy to recuperate the work of Salvador Dali, who like other surrealists, continued in his most characteristic works to employ two of modernism’s biggest taboos: spatial illusionism and photographic realism. She nonetheless finds ways to compare some of Dali’s later works to Pollock and Color Field painting, among other things, choosing to emphasize how Dali unconsciously foretold future developments that are important in the Modernist timeline, rather than how he might have consciously engaged with an academic tradition of which he was well aware, but that Modernism had deemed moribund.

So for many critics who remain wedded to Greenberg’s model of formalism, paintings should be judged on the conventions of that medium only, color, texture, line, and the flatness of the canvas. Literary and narrative associations, perspectival space, realistic figuration, and carefully effaced brushstrokes are superfluous or untrue to the properties of paint, and when these things are present, like in *Midsummer*, or even Dali, it is still from whatever existing purely “plastic” or formal values that aesthetic validity must be derived.

For to derive or assign aesthetic pleasure or worth to these so-called “extra-plastic” values is to fall under the spell of kitsch, as Greenberg elucidated it in his essay. Paintings whose subjects are instantly recognizable, highly legible, show no discontinuity between art and life, and do not ask a viewer to accept and understand a difficult visual

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convention, but rather offer predigested experiences, effects, and sensations for unreflective enjoyment, are kitsch.

But what, then, to say about the many artists today, postmodern inheritors of the Pop Art movement that so vexed Greenberg in his later years, who work in a more or less realist manner, or who mine art history for imagery and associations that have been deemed kitschy? John Currin, for example, has referred to himself as an “academic realist.” His paintings mix, according to Kimmelman, “leering, lightheaded kitsch with old-masterish weight as if there were no distinction.” And, of course, there is no distinction any more, since postmodernism’s “kitschification” of culture, with the boundaries blurred between high and low, and art that is predicated on an endless series of references and quotes. So if strict formalist criticism no longer applies, what, besides time, separates Currin’s work from a similar academic painting of the 19th century?

Irony is apparently what protects works like Currin’s enables it to be taken seriously, and to be kept from being defined as kitsch. He, and other artists use and comment on kitsch, and the savvy audience’s understanding of this allows them to chuckle knowingly with the artist, as he holds up our cultural cliches to scrutiny.

Within the context of ironic appropriation, these contemporary works are lauded and given retrospectives at the Whitney. 19th century academic paintings, on the other hand, seemingly bereft of irony, are dismissed as kitsch.

Here is a painting in our collection that is frequently conjured as the ultimate example of 19th century academic kitsch: *The Birth of Venus*, painted by Alexandre Cabanel in 1863. Ours is one of two major replicas commissioned from Cabanel of the original painting purchased by Napoleon III and now in the Musee d’Orsay.

Tomas Kulka uses it as the cover image for his book, *Kitsch and Art*, although in his discussion of the painting, he concedes that, like many other similar academic works of

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the period, it is not truly kitsch, despite meeting so many of the qualifications he sets forth, such as instant legibility and a highly charged emotional theme. What preserves it from the fate of being pure kitsch is what he defines as its art historical value; its significance as a representative of the dominant taste of the time, even its role as the antithesis of the new painting that would become known as Impressionism.

I agree with this, but I also think that an argument can be made that some of the same things that prevent Currin and his ilk from being labeled outright kitsch today are also in play in Cabanel's painting, which almost seems to have skipped over modernism directly to postmodernism. As a trained and highly skilled painter, he had spent years marinating in tradition, and was thus fully aware of the way he was quoting, playing with and transforming art of the past--he knew his Raphael, his Titian, and his Boucher.

He may not have done it as completely or as boldly or as shockingly as Manet did with his *Olympia*, but, knowing and indeed being complicit in the decadent Second Empire tastes he was serving, from his patron the Emperor, to the wealthy clients who purchased painted replicas of the image, down to the middle class who purchased the myriad inexpensive authorized prints of the image, Cabanel was aware that the appeal of his version of the classical goddess of love would be in her audience's scandalized recognition of her as a modern French courtesan playing the role of Venus. Where Manet's *Olympia* was for the majority of critics and the public, merely illegible on both a formal and social level, Cabanel's Venus was recognized and criticized, with many a nudge and wink, for being very legible indeed.

In his book Kulka claims that if *The Birth of Venus* were painted today it would be considered kitsch. Here's a remarkably derivative recent painting by Will Cotton that was shown at the Mary Boone gallery, that bastion of kitsch. Is it Kitsch?

Interestingly, in the early 1970s, by which time the borders between "high" and "low," between "art" and "kitsch" seemed utterly permeable, Greenberg applied his earlier

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critiques of academic art--the idea of received decisions, the use of recognizable imagery--advertising and pop culture, in the case of Pop art--to a whole new generation of art. If, as he stated, “academic art is defined everywhere by the dodging of risks,” then so too, according to him, was much of the art in his later years: “Lots of art today (he said) takes refuge in a category, even if that category itself is ‘risk’ or ‘surprise.’” I would add ‘irony’ as a category here too. The whole argument was a kind of recapitulation of the divide between the academic and the modern, but now it was between Greenbergian Modernism, ie. formalism, and the “anything goes” aspect of Pop and Postmodernism.

Although he still was no great fan, Greenberg did temper his opinion of academic art in later years. He recognized what he called the “distinctive, if not large or searching, satisfactions” of respectable academic art, mentioning Gerome, Bouguereau, Alma-Tadema, and Meissonier by name. We’ll certainly take “distinctive,” especially coupled with this comment Greenberg made in 1971, which I’ll end with:

“But then there is academic art, which is not necessarily bad art. It may be inferior to the very best art, it may be inferior to less than the very best art, but academic art is not always, or necessarily always, bad by virtue of its being academic. And here comes another definition. Academic art succumbs to the tendency to satisfy expectations too patly, too neatly, without enough surprise, without testing your taste, without challenging your taste, without challenging your expectations or demands. But academic art can also satisfy without necessarily letting you down. I don’t think the word “academic” should be used altogether in a pejorative sense.”