

DAHESH MUSEUM OF ART

Contact: Pamela Dunn

T 212.759.0606, pdunn@daheshmuseum.org

FRENCH ARTISTS IN ROME: INGRES TO DEGAS, 1803-1873

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Dahesh Museum of Art Reopens with Unprecedented Exhibition Celebrating the French Academy in Rome and Academic Art

New York, NY -- This fall, the Dahesh Museum of Art will reopen in elegant new quarters at 580 Madison Avenue with an exhibition that uniquely blends historical significance with aesthetic delight. As the inaugural exhibition in its new home at 57th and Madison, *French Artists in Rome: Ingres to Degas, 1803-1873* will be the spectacular centerpiece of the Dahesh's anticipated relaunch, which dramatically opens a new chapter for the Museum and its mission of presenting the finest 19th-century academic art.

The exhibition, which was organized by the French Academy in Rome to commemorate its own bicentennial at the Villa Medici, represents the only North American appearance of more than 130 major paintings and sculptures that explore and document an institution central to the artistic life of 19th-century France. The influence of Rome – its art, culture, history, and landscape – on young French artists such as Ingres, Carpeaux, Corot, and Flandrin who studied at the Villa Medici, the French Academy's outpost in the Eternal City, as well as Frenchmen who worked in Rome independently, like Moreau and Degas.

Lenders to the exhibition include the Villa Medici, the Musée d'Orsay, the Louvre, the Musée de Beaux-Arts in Aix-en-Provence, Angers, Montpellier, and many other French cities; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Walters Art Museum, the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., as well as a number of private collectors.

By the 19th-century, Rome had already inspired and nurtured the careers of European artists for centuries. The French Academy in Rome, founded by King Louis XIV in 1666, provided a formal foundation for the process, affording brilliant young artists of each generation the opportunity to absorb the influences of the Eternal City's classical and Renaissance treasures in the context of a vibrant intellectual community. After a decade of suppression following the French Revolution of 1789, the institution reopened in 1803 in a setting worthy of its high purpose: the Villa Medici, a Renaissance palazzo overlooking the city from above the Spanish steps, where it still flourishes today.

Residing at the Villa Medici were winners of the *prix de Rome*, all students from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris whose sojourn, up to five years, was underwritten by the French government. Under the aegis of the Academy, the Villa Medici combined the support of a

community with the stimulation of a *foyer* for aesthetic interchange that brought its *pensionnaires* (resident student artists) into contact with distinguished compatriots, Gustave Moreau and Edgar Degas among them, who were visiting Rome or had chosen to live and work there independently.

The exhibition roughly spans the golden age of the French Academy in Rome, a period of political ferment from the reign of Napoleon in Italy to that country's unification in 1870. On view will be such rarely seen treasures as Ingres's *Ambassadors of Agamemnon*, Cabanel's *Death of Moses*, Flandrin's *Polites*, Bouguereau's *Battle Between the Centaurs and Lapiths*, Puvis de Chavannes's *Young Woman at the Seashore*, and Degas's *Woman on a Terrace*, as well as works by Carpeaux, Corot, David d'Angers, Géricault, Granet, Moreau, Navez, and Vernet.

French Artists in Rome: Ingres to Degas, 1803-1873 reveals the full breadth of the Villa Medici experience, sampling the *prix de Rome* efforts that gained laureates their place in Rome; the *envois* that *pensionnaires* sent home to the Academy in Paris each year to document their artistic progress; portraits of fellow students and directors; the urban and rural landscapes they discovered, depictions of idealized peasants and brigands, works that illustrate Ingres's enduring influence, and others produced after these artists returned to France, that suggest how their years in Rome continued to captivate and inspire.

THE VILLA MEDICI: A WORLD APART

"My study is now located in the middle of a garden, there I have no other distraction than the song of nightingales and blackbirds who live in the laurel trees."

*--Charles Philippe Lariviere,
Pensionnaire, 1825-1829*

The 19th century French Academy in Rome owed its success as much to its extraordinary site as to the support of political leaders and such intellectuals as François-René de Châteaubriand, the French Ambassador to Rome. It dominated the landscape both literally and figuratively, an animated artistic and intellectual center that introduced wide-ranging modern currents of thought to the ancient capital.

While the Academy hosted legendary festivities and received such distinguished visitors as the composer Franz Liszt (1811-1886), the hilltop villa was also a somewhat cloistered community of resident painters, sculptors, engravers, musicians, and architects that enjoyed its own rhythm of life.

Most *pensionnaires* created souvenirs of their artistic *rite de passage* by depicting themselves in their studios, often with a background view of modern Rome or the evocative site of the Villa itself. It was also a tradition to make portraits of fellow students, and each departing director was memorialized with a bust.

A portrait of François-Marius Granet by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, who was both *pensionnaire* (1805-1810) and director of the Villa Medici (1835-1840) is a fine example of

such souvenirs. Dressed in a painter's cape with a sketchbook in hand, Granet—not a *pensionnaire* but a resident of Rome for more than 20 years—is depicted against the dramatic backdrop of the Quirinale Palace before an approaching storm.

Léon Cogniet (*pensionnaire*, 1818-1822) created his self-portrait, *The Artist in his Room at the Villa Medici*, to commemorate the first letter he received from his family. The landscape seen through an open window attests to the artist's preference for painting outdoors.

THE SCHOOL OF ROME: INGRES AND DAVID D'ANGERS

The re-establishment of the French Academy in Rome meant the rebirth of the “School of Rome,” as it was called in the 19th century, in which the grandeur of the past informed contemporary academic practice. Copying after Greek, Roman, and Renaissance masters and drawing from the live model was fundamental in the *pensionnaires*' artistic development, as exemplified by the work of the painter Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres and the sculptor Pierre-Jean David, known as David d'Angers.

The Ambassadors of Agamemnon in the Tent of Achilles won Ingres the Rome prize in 1801. Various ancient works have been identified as compositional sources for the individual figures that make up this complex painting. Such “citations” were a basic neoclassical practice of the time, particularly recommended to students as a way of nurturing their craft.

Of particular interest here are the works that secured for these great artists their places at the Villa Medici. David d'Angers's *The Death of Epaminondas, after the Battle of Mantinea*, in plaster, took the *prix de Rome* in 1811, marking the start of a highly successful career. In a well-reasoned composition, the artist combines clearly delineated forms, accurate perspective, and convincing expressions of sorrow.

THE NUDE AND DRAPERY

The nude, and its necessary ornament, drapery, were the cornerstones of the academic ideal. The purity, nobility, and beauty of the human body – predominantly male – was the central and single most important element in any history painting. This essential expression of the academic spirit is here examined through the *envois de Rome*, the paintings or sculptures *pensionnaires* submitted to the French Academy in Paris each year to document their artistic progress.

In this section, the stylistic evolution of the human figure is shown, in painting and sculpture of the 1840s, through a variety of forms: the virile hero (Foyatier, *Spartacus*, 1824), the pastoral (Boissellier, *Shepherd at a Tomb*, 1808), the classical god (Blondel, *The Death of Hyacinth*, 1810), and the more modern incarnation of a popular hero (Barrias, *The Gallic Prisoner*, 1847).

The *Figure Study: Polites, Son of Priam, Observing the Movements of the Greeks toward Troy*, by Hippolyte Flandrin (*pensionnaire*, 1833-1837), exemplifies the persistence of the Ingresque classical model well into the 19th century. This, Flandrin's first *envoi de Rome*, was well received as a figure study by a young student.

The Death of Moses by Alexandre Cabanel (*pensionnaire*, 1846-1850) is a draped figure, as was obligatory in religious paintings. This final *envoi de Rome* eloquently testifies to Cabanel's artistic progress during his Italian sojourn. Reveling in the masterpieces that surrounded him, Cabanel was clearly inspired by Renaissance masters like Michelangelo and Raphael.

CITY AND LANDSCAPE: BETWEEN MYTH AND NATURE

Beyond its artistic wealth, the rich physicality of Rome and its surrounding countryside inspired the artists who worked there. Chateaubriand described the Roman landscape, under its dazzling light, as an interchange between natural marvels and epic historical associations. Historical landscape painting would seem an inevitable expression of this dynamic, and the first *prix de Rome* for work in this genre was awarded (to Achille-Etna Michallon) in 1817. A choice example displayed here is Paul Flandrin's *Landscape: The Farewell of an Exile and His Family*, in which a temple and classical figures add resonance to a majestic natural setting.

History painters such as Guillaume Bodinier, Joseph-Désiré Court, and Charles-Philippe Larivière, all represented in this section, made outings together to paint the distinctive light of the Roman countryside *en plein air* (open air).

Within the walls of Rome, the picturesque and historical significance of such ancient sites as the Colosseum and Forum Romanum was another source of inspiration, while the centrality of Rome within the Catholic faith, as embodied in the Vatican and the city's countless churches, convents, and monasteries, provided a reverberant motif for artists who were raised in its traditions. Particularly interesting in this regard is Francois-Marius Granet's *View of the Interior of the Colosseum*, in which the painter transforms an impressive view of the monument into a genre scene with local people praying before a crucifix, an emblem of Christianity conquering pagan Rome.

While Camille Corot never competed for the *prix de Rome*, he came to Italy at his own expense, and it was here that he would mature as a landscape painter. *Rome: View Taken from the Window of the Artist*, a touching little sketch that captures the urban prospect from the room Corot rented near the Spanish Steps and the Villa Medici, represents a point of departure for a career in which the visual impact of Italy would come to play a central role.

THE ROMAN PEOPLE: FROM THE HEROIC TO THE PICTURESQUE

The people of Rome appealed to the imagination of the French who sojourned there. Intellectuals like Chateaubriand and Stendhal mythologized them as the uncorrupted inheritors of ideal classical beauty—modern incarnations of ancient heroes. In the works of such artists as Leopold Robert, Horace Vernet, and Victor Schnetz, Rome's peasants and brigands became visual signifiers of the free and unencumbered life. Villa Medici *pensionnaires* and artist-visitors like Théodore Chasseriau and Edgar Degas deepened the myth, depicting a race of savagely noble men and gracefully dignified women.

A romanticized, even dangerous vitality is evident in the portrait *Mazzoichi, an Italian Brigand* by Achille-Etna Michallon (*pensionnaire* 1818-1821). Mazzoichi, a man "famous for his beauty, his dexterity and his exploits" (in the words of a narrative the painter added in the studio) was

among the subjects made available to Michallon from the prisons of Termini, through the efforts of Villa Medici director Charles Thévenin.

A sunnier shade of local color suffuses *The Marriage Proposal. Costumes of Albano, near Rome*. The artist, Guillaume Bodinier, was not a *prix de Rome* winner, but followed his teacher, Pierre-Narcisse Guerin, when the latter became director at the Villa Medici in 1822. Bodinier remained in Italy for 25 years. This genre painting of a man asking a mother for the hand of her daughter, which the artist submitted for his first Salon in 1827, reflects an abiding interest in rural Italian culture and his exquisite technical abilities in rendering it.

FROM INGRES'S CLASSICISM TO THE TRIUMPH OF ECLECTICISM

The dynamism of this period is evident in the evolution of works displayed in this section. As director of the French Academy in Rome (1835-1840), Ingres oversaw an era of remarkable stylistic coherence in which the religious, mythological, and historical themes of academic art were subjugated to the classical rigors of contour and line. But the years after 1850—a time of aesthetic turmoil marked by the 1863 teaching reforms at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the Salon des Refusés—saw a break from the Ingresque norm, as artists began to explore new subjects and modes of expression while staying loyal to the academic spirit.

In *The Battle between the Centaurs and the Lapiths*, Adolphe-William Bouguereau (*pensionnaire*, 1851-1853) renders a recurring theme of Greek art in the academic mode while adding a note of sensuality. Paying homage to classical sculpture, Bouguereau realized a complicated visual motif in a composition that features frieze-like groupings in three planes. He invested great effort in rendering the elaborate drapery—a reflection of his classical training—that envelops the painting's central figure.

Nearly twenty years later, the last *envoi de Rome* of Luc-Olivier Merson (*pensionnaire*, 1870-1873) represents a departure within the academic tradition. *Saint-Edmond, King of England, Martyr*, was Merson's first large-scale religious painting. Although the work represented an attempt to revive an important academic genre, the stylized rendition of this subject from medieval British history could be called proto-symbolist: lying next to the weapons of execution, the martyr's body is unblemished, bloodshed suggested only by a piece of red fabric.

ROME AND THE CLASSICISM OF THE IMAGINATION

Nurtured by memories and associations, the years that *pensionnaires* and other artists had spent in Rome remained an abundant source of aesthetic capital after their return to France. The exhibition concludes with paintings that suggest the influence that this city of cultural and natural riches continued to exert on their work.

The *Plague in Rome*, executed by Jules-Elie Delaunay (*pensionnaire*, 1857-1860) nearly a decade after his time at Villa Medici, records monuments of the Eternal City and emulates Old Master paintings the artist had encountered there. Inspired by a picture in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli commemorating the pestilence that devastated Rome in 1476, Delaunay sketched the subject early in his residency, and sent an *envoi* on the same theme two years later. This striking painting, exhibited in the Salon of 1869, contains such references to

Delaunay's stay as the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius, the tower of the Milizie, and the staircase of the Santa Maria de l'Aracoeli.

Gustav Moreau's *Hesiod and the Muses* is based on drawings that the artist made while in Italy, visiting on his own after trying and twice failing to win the *prix de Rome* in 1848 and 1849. He abandoned his studies at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts shortly afterward—but on a visit to Italy he studied the Renaissance masters and attended drawing classes at Villa Medici. The gestures of Hesiod and the kneeling muse may have been inspired by the central group in Perugino's *Christ Delivering the Keys to Saint Peter* in the Sistine Chapel, while the painting's monochromatic quality suggests Pompeian frescos that Moreau copied during his travels in Italy.

The figures in *Young Women at the Seashore*, by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, are clearly reminiscent of classical goddesses. These stylized figures in sculptural poses hint at abstraction and the modernist aesthetic that would eventually prevail.

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To learn more about French artists at the Villa Medici, visit us online at daheshmuseum.org and read an interview with Olivier Bonfait, Curator of the French Academy in Rome, the man who first conceived and organized this exhibition for Maestà di Roma, a citywide celebration in Spring 2003 of Rome and the foreign artists who lived and worked there during the 19th century.

CATALOGUE

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Museum has published a lavishly illustrated, 64 page catalogue with 66 color plates. *French Artists in Rome: Ingres to Degas 1803-1873* is edited by Curator Roger Diederer, who organized this exhibition for its only viewing outside Rome, with an essay co-authored by Olivier Bonfait and Antoinette Le Normand-Romain. It will be available in the Museum Shop and can also be ordered on line at daheshmuseum.org

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

As part of its public outreach for *French Artists in Rome*, the Dahesh Museum of Art has designed a series of public programs during the run of the exhibition that includes discussions, lectures, a Roman wine tasting, a bilingual Italian-English performance, intergenerational tours, a children's opening, a video presentation of the film *Roman Holiday*, hands-on-art activities, guided tours for families, schools and adults, and more.

EXHIBITION SUPPORTERS

This exhibition, its programs, and catalogue were made possible in part with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, a State agency. Promotional support has been provided by Le Parker Meridien New York, *the New York Sun*, WHERE New York, and *The Art Newspaper*.

GENERAL INFORMATION

The Dahesh Museum of Art is located at 580 Madison Avenue at the corner of 57th Street. It is open Tuesday-Sunday, 11am-6pm, and closed Monday and all legal holidays. Admission: \$9 adults, \$4 for students and seniors (62+). Free to Museum Members and children under 12 with an adult. Pay as you wish 6-9pm on *First Thursdays*. For more information, contact 212.759.0606 or daheshmuseum.org

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