

Francis Haskell. *Rediscoveries in Art: Some Aspects of Taste, Fashion and Collecting in England and France*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1976. 246 pp., 255 illus., \$19.50

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than any defined by Paulson, namely the striving for national cultural reform, which was fostered by the Enlightenment and which became intimately connected with the creation and expansion of the academies during the eighteenth century. In this process a contributory factor was the renewed interest in Dutch art in France and, to a lesser degree, in England, which Paulson chooses to link with the anti-academic groups. Dutch art influenced not only Chardin, the conversation piece genre, and Longhi, but also Boucher and Greuze, who, like the lesser members of the St. Martin's Lane Academy, are hardly examined by the author. Diderot — another important omission in a study in which European art and aesthetics are considered — praised Dutch painting for its truth and morality before he enjoined artists to emulate the stoicism and clarity of Classical art. He also contributed to the rewriting of academic theory in the eighteenth century which was, however, less exactly defined than Paulson suggests. While Reynolds endorsed the academic system in his *Discourses*, he also stressed the value of invention and of personal expression. Nor did he follow his own precepts too closely. His portraits remain as vivid records of contemporary society as do those of Gainsborough, containing at least some of the elements of style and communication which Paulson considers to be progressive. He ignores the effect upon pictorial expression of experiments with materials and technique. Furthermore, each of the covey of artists singled out by Paulson adopted Reynolds's proposition that a modern style should be created by the adaptation of historical art and culture. Gainsborough, for one, combined the Claudian composition and presumed system of colouring with picturesque irregularity in his mature landscapes and, as is acknowledged, similarities of approach and intention can be traced between Wright and Copley or Zoffany and Barry. Genre painting, which Paulson regards as running counter to academic art, also occupied a significant place in the Royal Academy exhibitions, but the effectiveness of this section of the book is diminished by the absence of comment upon Morland, Mortimer, Peters, and Wheatley, whose art confounds dogmatic distinctions.

Lastly, the manner in which Paulson presents his arguments is confusing. The summary of the book in the concluding paragraph is in itself a sample of the obscurities that confront the reader. Recalling the importance of comprehending "usage, context and relationship" in eighteenth-century art, he continues, "the comic demonstration of this fact in Hogarth's work has proved paradigmatic for the operation of iconography in the second half of the century. The development we have traced is from Reynolds and a grammatical system, based on eternal normative laws of syntax and semantics, to Wright and Gainsborough and what we might call, by analogy, a philological system in that origins of images are sought and both artist and viewer reach back in search of an etymology (*etymos logos*, authentic meaning), which is in effect a new beginning." He fails to elucidate whether he means that the artists upon whom he concentrates effected a "new beginning" in terms of the history of art, a new language of form without significance for the future, or merely the truism that each arrived at an individual style by reinterpreting received knowledge and contemporary practice. In either of the former cases the statement requires that Paulson pursue his themes into nineteenth-century art, not forgetting a fuller examination of the earlier periods.

The implication appears to be that these artists reduced the validity of the humanist tradition and, more specifically, the academic view of art. Clearly both were disrupted by the emergence of opposing cultural forces, including the Romantic Movement and the materialistic and mechanistic ideas engendered by the Industrial Revolution. Yet a majority of artists and theorists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries sought to adapt the old ideals, as indicated by the adherence of such imaginative painters as Turner and Delacroix to the fundamental academic principles. That astute architectural historian, James Fergusson, classified the early nineteenth century with the Renaissance and, despite the obvious differences in medium and purpose, his judgment holds good for the history of painting and sculpture. The profound transition occurred in the mid-nineteenth century when artists began to reject not only traditional iconography but also the authority of historical art and the Renaissance concept of art as a sister to poetry and morality.

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FRANCIS HASKELL. *Rediscoveries in Art: Some Aspects of Taste, Fashion and Collecting in England and France*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1976. 246 pp., 255 illus., \$19.50.

It was one of the more endearing expressions of nineteenth-century certainties on both sides of the Atlantic for the upper façades or pediments of art galleries and libraries to be adorned with labelled figures in stone that represented a rather free mingling of the great artists or poets and thinkers of the past with those of modern times.

It must have now and then occurred to someone of more recent date to wonder why, in the case of the Parnassian assemblies of artists, this one was included and another not. There undoubtedly was a time when the choice aroused actual discussion and perhaps controversy, but it had seemed long past. If anyone of sufficient learning looks at them now, it is usually only to note the obvious descent of the idea from Raphael and to regret that the conception and execution likewise represent a descent.

It has remained for Francis Haskell to develop such a moment of initially mild curiosity into a book, or, to be more accurate, a series of lectures that have now been polished into a book with the promising title of *Rediscoveries in Art*. I should like to say at once that it is a very good book, rich in new ideas and fresh perceptions, plummy with unhackneyed illustrations, rewarding at nearly every turn, witty and warm.

The banch of study, as much social as art history, that is devoted to the nature, deployment, and effects of patronage in the fine arts has in recent years been largely an English preserve and its most eminent practitioner is Francis Haskell. It is a subject that on this continent somehow seems both more useful and more attractive to museum curators than to academic art historians. The latter too often

seem to regard its pursuit as peripheral if not even frivolous. This is a mistake.

Patronage is at least as old as civilization, well remarked by, among others, Pliny and Vasari, and is indeed a necessary pre-condition to the existence of any art more serious than that of mere self-indulgence. Yet among today's artists and art students on this side of the Atlantic, there is an odd notion about that patronage is outmoded and vile, that it necessarily inhibits, distorts, or corrupts free expression, that it deserves only to be denounced as loudly as possible. In this country, of course, the largesse of the Canada Council and the Art Bank are exempt from such opprobrium, their patronage differing in some subtle, indefinable but highly acceptable way from that still fortunately exercised here by a few enlightened capitalists and by the occasional corporation or municipality.

The very existence of such attitudes suggests that those teachers of art history who are in contact with studio majors ought to be more aware than they of the complexities and truths of patronage. It was therefore a happy thought that the committee for the Wrightsman Lectures at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York should have invited Professor Haskell in 1973 to devote himself to various aspects of this problem other than those charted in his now famous *Patrons and Painters: A Study in the Relations Between Italian Art and Society in the Age of the Baroque* (New York, 1963). The five New York lectures now published in somewhat enriched form represent a marked shift in focus from the earlier book. Some readers may consider it a weakness that Haskell avoids concerning himself directly with contemporary dilemmas, but this is hardly a scholarly fault; just how much ground *can* be satisfactorily covered in five lectures? His discussion and the points he has chosen to emphasize do make abundantly clear the kinds of decisive roles that the vagaries of patronage and criticism do indeed play in shaping the fates of artists both living and dead.

Haskell's general premise is that the apparent caprices of taste that everyone has noted are by no means so capricious as most of us think. But their causes, surprisingly often explainable by one who takes the trouble, are so complex and sometimes so far removed from the areas scrutinized by art historians as to escape notice. He also believes that the components of the taste-forming equation of any given generation are by no means confined simply to artists and critics and that there is a relation between what is encouraged in contemporary art and admired in that of the past: if, as just now, there is no element of exclusionism about the older masters, anything and everything goes with the would-be new and their patrons.

It does not matter now whether he started speculating about Armstead's cast of characters on the podium of the Albert Memorial (Fig. 1) before or after receiving the Wrightsman invitation. His conclusions based on its inclusions and exclusions together with those of Paul Delaroche's Hemicycle in the École des beaux-arts, buttressed by those of James Barry's *Elysium and Tartarus*, Ingres' *Apotheosis of Homer*, Overbeck's *Triumph of Religion in the Arts*, and Nicaise de Keyser's *The Antwerp School of Painters*, provide a brilliant starting point in the opening chapter called "Hierarchies and Subversions." These works all belong to a period studded with great and small political revolutions reflected (hardly caused, as some enthusiastic chroniclers of the arts would have us believe) by a series of challenges in the fine arts to the authority of

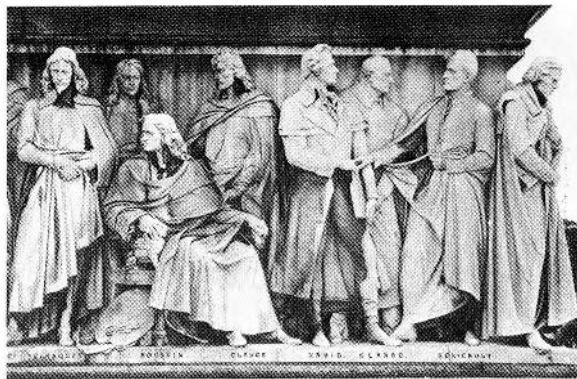


FIGURE 1. H.H. Armstead, Podium of the Painters on the Albert Memorial (detail). From Haskell.

the academies. The lines of stress from decade to decade show very clearly in the omissions as well as in the inclusions in these solidified visual lists of the accepted Masters. If each represents a deep-seated social desire to freeze taste, we can be sure that this temporary order will soon be disturbed by anything from a nudge to an earthquake, yet among the tottered idols a certain few will always remain standing. Nevertheless, in Haskell's civilized view, these eruptions represent neither a cycle of tyranny and revolution nor an utterly capricious flux, but rather a continuous and complex debate.

He makes his own rediscoveries not of artists but of influential critics, collectors, dealers, looting generals, curious clergymen, museum directors' officious wives, and others whose recorded opinions and actions can be shown to have influenced significant changes in taste in either England or France and sometimes in both. He here introduces the first of an extraordinary series of such largely unfamiliar protagonists — one is tempted to say of some of them heroes — in the person of J.-B.-P. Lebrun. It was this painter-dealer-critic who, among other commendable accomplishments, rediscovered Vermeer a good sixty years before Thoré achieved this feat, announcing the fact in a book published in Paris (rather unfortunately) in 1792. He also unearthed Saenredam and was even able in the Revolution to extol the merits of Watteau. Indeed the name of Watteau constantly recurs in the pages of Haskell as he is alternately embraced and repudiated, even occasionally at different times by the same critics, according to the political exigencies of the moment. It is amazing to learn how, of all painters, this one could appeal so strongly (and even be made out to have been a solid proto-revolutionary) to some of the furthest-left critics of the nineteenth century, their good taste in this instance apparently overcoming their dogma. Without declaring any intention of so doing, he makes mincemeat of the claim by left-wing critics (and artists) to be in possession of the only true talisman. They are again and again shown to have been at least as ridiculous and inconsistent in their judgments, if not more so, than critics of other persuasions or none at all.

In the second chapter, "Revolution and Reaction," he addresses himself to some of the artistic side-effects of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the subsequent mopping-up. Insofar as the dispersal of the Orléans Gallery, the Peninsula War, and the concomitant introduction of Spanish painting to the North and the Napoleonic

loot and its fate are concerned, we are on familiar ground. Yet, as we have come to expect from Haskell, much fresh material is brought forward. An example is in quotations from newly discovered letters from the lawyer-dealer William Buchanan. Here we begin to meet a series of collectors of a new breed — the Hopes, the Barings, John Julius Angerstein — and to hear some pointed, even discreditable, remarks concerning the eminent painter-advisors who were a crucial element of this equation.

The official Napoleonic loot of Italian collections both public and ecclesiastical and the effect of punitive French taxation on old private collections in Italy are investigated at some length here, as are the surprisingly unrelated collecting activities of Cardinal Fesch and Lucien Bonaparte. This discussion shows that not only were the great works of the Renaissance and early Baroque painters at high premium, but that some of the English collectors who later profited from all this upheaval were already showing a precocious interest in Italian primitives and other unfashionable artists. Yet the short-term net result was that “the budding interest in earlier — or remoter — art which had developed slowly but fairly steadily in the 1780s and early ’90s was submerged by the sudden and unexpected availability of so many great and established masterpieces.”

It was the rare man, such as George Augustus Wallis, who at this time and in these circumstances could spot for himself the genius of such unknowns as El Greco, Zurbarán and Cano, when Titians, Rubenses, Correggios and even Raphaels were to be had on the market almost in quantity. In spite of this latter abundance, which was really the preserve of the rich, Haskell is able to introduce us to a series of private French collectors of remarkable taste and some influence, not only the relatively well known such as Vivant-Denon and Wicar, but other interesting figures such as Seroux-d’Agincourt and Cacaault. He also provides us with fresh information about the English timber merchant and omnivorous, freakish picture collector Edward Solly, a name familiar to all who know the great Berlin collections.

In “The Two Temptations” Haskell considers some of the direct effects of changing values of taste on the contemporary art of the first half or so of the nineteenth century: this is seen primarily in terms of the familiar battle between the Neo-Classicalists armed with one set of ideals and the Romanticists with another, both tending to have to re-evaluate the dictates of established taste, but each desiring to replace those with their own violently conflicting views. Much of the detailed evidence here is fresh and even novel. It is valuable to discover in this connection how strong national instincts remained at a moment of great expansion of horizons, and how differently, for example, English and French artists reacted to the revivals of collectors’ interests in both countries in early Italian and French Rococo painting. “I sometimes feel,” remarks the author, “that before 1848 every painter in England had admired the works of the artists preceding Raphael — except those who were to become the Pre-Raphaelites.”

Debate was waged not so much on whether the traditional heroes of the artists’ training should be abandoned, but rather over whether the pantheon should be enlarged to accept the emerging and exciting works of neglected periods of schools and, worse, from barbarian and exotic cultures both ancient and newly found. The English artists tended to close ranks to protect tradition. The upshot was that “from now on the ‘primitives’ belonged to a closed

world of pure art divorced from contemporary preoccupations.” In France, despite a series of revolutions, the same period saw a steady revival of love for the eighteenth-century French painters who had figuratively been sent to the guillotine several times over.

“In France, as in England, a taste for unorthodox art carried with it political, social and religious, as well as aesthetic, implications.” At this juncture, Haskell turns his attention briefly but sharply to the aesthetic effects of extreme Catholicism (and High Church Anglicanism). He insists that such conditioning does play an important role on the formation of taste and that this in turn can be felt far beyond those it primarily affects. He strongly suggests that a full-scale study of the interrelations between a feeling for early Italian and Northern art with religion would be valuable, but also remarks that J. A. Symonds’s notorious fears for the future of taste in the face of militant Catholicism proved largely groundless against the stronger aesthetic weight of the history of art.

The last two chapters, “Taste and History” and “Spreading the News,” are basically devoted to exploring the thesis that art history itself, both as an existing force and as the subject of increasingly objective study, was to have a decisive role in maintaining the essentially conservative taste that tended to override all attempts at incursion in the nineteenth century. Even when, as in the 1840s and ’50s, taste “could be extraordinarily fluid and receptive,” this openness was short-lived and was not to recur for more than another century. Meanwhile, a “policy of systematic exclusion” in both private and public collecting was to remain the general rule. Yet in studying the period, the most interesting and contributory personalities he finds to be precisely those who had the most adventurous instincts and the strongest convictions about their discoveries. Their slender ranks included such men as Hippolyte Taine, Lord Lindsay, Dr. Louis DeCaze, the Irish-born Frenchman Baron Isidore Taylor, and Sir William Stirling-Maxwell, plus such redoubtable women as Lady Callcott and Lady Eastlake. These and a few others were responsible at roughly mid-century and prior to the art historical studies of the artists concerned for the reappraisal of “almost all the supremely great artists who are so conspicuously missing from Delaroche’s Hemicycle and Armstead’s Podium.” (It is most curious that the living influence of Prince Albert himself is mentioned only once and Winslow Ames’s important study, *Prince Albert and Victorian Taste* [London, ca. 1967], not at all.)

All this was accompanied by a temporary collapse of old-master collecting among the super-rich in the wake of a run of forgery scandals and to the benefit of contemporary artists who in any case, if clever and accommodating, could be sure of fame, fortune and even titles. The solid work nonetheless continued undiminished among the truly discriminating. The element of fastidious choice was, as Haskell shows, brilliantly exercised during several of the gigantic dispersals that took place at this time. And he further demonstrates, with the Pereires as his exemplars, that it is possible to chart quite precisely the moments when such happy re-discoveries “become absorbed into the fashionable consciousness.”

It seems to be at the same time, he points out, that the “art historian-dealer takes over from the artist-dealer as the arbiter of taste.” Of these, the celebrated Thoré-Burger receives a fresh interpretation that does not diminish his

achievement, but does question his alleged commitment to modern art and calls him the "last and possibly the greatest, old-fashioned art historian." He also shows, contrary to the accepted view, that Thoreau was far more moved by emotions and ideals than he was devoted to the precise methodologies of scholarship now fashionable and that it was precisely because of this weighting that he was open to the perceptions on which rest his fame.

The final chapter investigates the numerous channels through which new ideas and reappraisals filtered to the public and thus influenced general taste: exhibitions, the development of museum collections, new processes of reproduction, copies, the vast increase of tourism in the wake of the new railways, guidebooks with carefully starred items, proliferation of both professional and general periodicals devoted to the arts, cartoons — the one thing conspicuously absent is some discussion of the insertion or infiltration of art into school and university curricula, though Ruskin's interest in the taste of the working man is touched upon. This section comprises a most useful annotated summary of fresh sources for students of nineteenth-century art and criticism.

The cumulative consequence of all this was that "old hierarchies had been irrevocably subverted," and by the end of the last century the spinning of the whirligig of taste in time was as dizzying as it has now again become as we enter the final quarter of our own. His closing paragraph is, in fact, sober in its honesty and is, in recognizing at once the positive gains due to rediscoveries and the shoals of mediocrity half-legitimized that cling to their tails, a trifle nostalgic for the days of lost innocence when one could still be certain of what was good and what was not worthy of attention.

Haskell has done his listeners, and now his readers, the supreme compliment of supposing them as widely and deeply informed as himself. The jewels of inside information are dropped in prodigal numbers as though everyone will recognize them at once. His experienced awareness of attention spans permitted him to give them and now us a constant stream of comfortably superior laughs at our benighted, highbrow, connoisseuring predecessors of the last century — comfortable, that is, until we realize that many of our statements (of which still more are recorded) will look equally ridiculous a hundred years hence.

Haskell's humanity and humour lighten even the most difficult pages. The reader accustomed to skimming will often miss essentials and might occasionally grow impatient, were it not that the author's truly understanding mastery of the minutiae of his material confers a real charm on the involved but helpfully colloquial expositions. One becomes aware of sly echoes: one of our Canadian heroines, Anna Jameson (I think perhaps Haskell does not know this) is described as a "one-time governess, jilted wife and commentator on Shakespeare's heroines, 'who knows as much about art as the cat,'" according to Ruskin"; two pages later: "Essentially Palgrave gave wide circulation to views that Bernard Berenson was still proclaiming more than a hundred years after the first publication of the *Handbook*." He is a master of the outrageous but fully hedged statement as an attention-getter, *vide* the opening of Chapter 4: "The history of taste in the Old Masters begins in the 1840s. By this provocative and demonstrably untrue statement I want to suggest . . ." He makes fun of himself in his frequently fascinating footnotes. All of this builds confidence.

Haskell is also never one, thank goodness, to shirk value judgments. Advanced students will find his footnotes not only mines of useful and often unusual bibliographical information, but will very frequently discover exactly how he rates both the reliability and the utility of his sources. His enthusiasm, often expressing itself in a footnote, may send some soon-to-be-enraptured student to the nearly forgotten *Italian Schools of Design* (1823) by William Young Ottley, who had so marvelous an eye for drawings.

The general level of printed art criticism was even more abysmal in the nineteenth century and perhaps still more venal than now. It cannot most of the time have been amusing to read one's way through the masses of it that survive and are here so ably reduced to manageable but accurate proportions, but the exercise is essential if one is to learn how the critics, artists, dealers, museum men (and sometimes their wives), and politicians of any given decade assessed contemporaneous art and re-evaluated that of the past. The minutes of the fairly regular parliamentary inquiries into the state of the arts, likewise investigated by Haskell, may be a trifle less dreary because the standard of cultivation of the men in public life seems to have been perhaps a notch higher in the last century than in this. Yet it takes equal courage and persistence to chart what these records reveal. He has not shirked either task and is likely for years to come to go on dredging up the details that throw a significant situation into really sharp relief.

It ought to be admitted that much of our precise current knowledge (Haskell gives abundant credits for it) of so many, more often than not justly, long-obscured artists is the consequence of the recent overproduction of doctoral students in art history: the novice, unready to cope with the giants and obliged to break "fresh" ground, presents us with yet another *catalogue raisonné* of some artist best left to moulder peacefully. He makes constant and well-deserved gibes at the current isolation of art-historical scholars and museum curators in their super-specialized cubicles. This is a vexation that one wishes could become really contagious and it is well justified by the grand sweep of his own book. This is what can be called contributory scholarship.

One may say, as Haskell readily admits, that taste is really not to be explained, only charted. The great value to criticism of such studies as these of Haskell is that they not only provide useful correctives to broad, over-simplified views of historical art, but constantly underscore the pernicious prevalence of fads in the art of the present as well as in the collecting and exhibiting of that of the past. The evanescence of fashion has always been and ever will be its essence. The modern critic who commits himself beyond retreat to any specific novelty is as surely doomed to ephemerality as the artist of similar ilk who cannot leap to another rising wave from the breaking crest he has been riding. The writer who narrows his vision to such a degree is in the end sure to become a tout and cease to retain whatever claim he had for consideration as a critic.

The whirligigs of taste may now be seen to be far less eccentric and far more predictable than hitherto imagined. Haskell is not only a remarkable charter of the deeps. He is an exemplary Spreader of the News.

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