

Houdon and Neoclassical Sculpture

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Jean Antoine Houdon (1741-1828)

A pupil of Michel-Ange Slodtz (1705-1764), Houdon enjoyed a place unrivalled in the history of sculpture : his long career presided over the development of Neoclassical statuary from the end of the Ancien Régime to the fall of the First Empire. Serving the administration of the king's buildings, like that of Catherine II of Russia or of the Duke of Saxe-Gotha, he tackled all genres from the reinterpretation of past models (*Diana the Huntress*, 1776) to the initiation of new canons (the *écorché figure* or "flayed man", 1767). A reputed portraitist, he produced an important gallery of his famous (or lesser-known) peers which forms a particularly representative ensemble of his art.

The *retrospective portrait of Molière**, a plaster copy produced by the artist for the Comédie-Française (France's national theatre) still bears the stamp of rocaille sculpture – true to the canonical image of the great playwright depicted in ordinary dress and wearing a skullcap, this is an outstanding piece of sculpture with its piercing gaze, flowing tresses and the skilful twisting of its kerchief.

As in the case of his *Jean-Jacques Rousseau** created after the philosopher's death mask, *Voltaire** cannot be considered to be a realistic portrait of the thinker, whom Houdon met only in 1778, a few days before his death. Yet this effigy was to emerge as the image par excellence of the patriarch of Ferney. Depicting Voltaire in a full cloak that masked the decrepitude of old age, Houdon focussed attention on the hands firmly gripping the armrests and the face with its keen expression of roguish intelligence conferring a timeless greatness upon the writer, in quite a different image to that of J.-B. Pigalle (1714-1785) in 1776 (fig.1).

A member of the Masonic Lodge of the Nine Sisters, which Voltaire joined towards the end of his life, Houdon was also the quasi-official portraitist of this society whose adherents included the main exponents of American independence. In his *bust of Benjamin Franklin** made when he came to France, Houdon recaptures the simple, austere appearance of the philanthropist/physicist. The success of this effigy led to his being commissioned to produce the portrait of Washington (fig.2), for which he travelled to the United States (1785).

*Winter** (1783) and *Summer** (1785) reveal the more allegorical side of Houdon's art. In the *Cold Girl**, the sculptor provides a new take on the traditional image of this cold season by giving a tangible sense to the feeling of cold through this sensual nudity – judged too indecent, the work could not be presented at the 1785 Salon. Designed from 1781 for Monsieur de Saint-Wast, the statue and its pendant are among the most famous of the artist's works in the Musée Fabre.

Augustin Pajou (1730-1709)

A distinguished member of the Academy, Pajou enjoyed a dazzling official career. The commissions he received from successive directors of the king's buildings allowed him to be part of the greatest construction projects of his day, such as the series of "Great Men of France" launched in 1776 where he worked alongside Houdon. This huge project with its virtuous designs probably inspired Raymond in his programme of the Promenade du Peyrou (cf. Room 22), which was Pajou's first contact with Montpellier.

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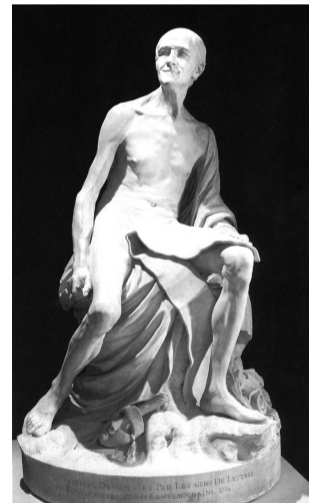


fig.1- Jean-Baptiste Pigalle
Seated Statue of Voltaire, 1776
Paris, Musée du Louvre
Photograph RMN / © Hervé Lewandovski



fig.2- Jean-Antoine Houdon
Georges Washington
Richmond, Capitol
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Pajou's time in the Languedocian capital between 1792 and 1794 was for him a period of intense creativity in which he devoted himself almost exclusively to the art of the portrait. As may be seen in the busts in this and the previous room, he was to develop here a sensitive, virtuosic style and a fond, tender vision of this familiar society of persons of note in which realism prevailed over the idealization of his models. Indeed, *Jean Baptiste Riban** was the son of the perfume merchant Maurice Riban who received the artist in Montpellier. In this informal image, the young man then aged twenty-nine is depicted in a natural pose with an open collar in a show of liberty. This bust was placed on the model's tomb when he died. Dating to the same year, 1793, is the *bust of Beauvais de Préau**, a member of the Convention from Orleans in exile in Montpellier where he was hanged by English troops for his role in the siege of Toulon. Despite the more formal character of the representation, a similar intensity and sentiment of naturalism are to be found here.

On his return to Paris after the death of his wife in 1797, Pajou would no longer meet with the same success, but his influence remained important for the next generation of sculptors, as shown in his portrait* made by his pupil Roland (1746-1816), with its perceptible sense of the master's humanism and the modernity of Neoclassicism.

Italy and Canova

In the eighteenth century, Italy was the main source of the Neoclassical revival, offering direct contact with the art of antiquity as revealed through archaeology, and accommodating theoreticians who, like Winckelmann, would see the regeneration of the arts in the Greek model. Antonio Canova (1757-1822) was the privileged exponent of this movement in which the quest for ideal beauty prevailed over the expressiveness of the subjects (see Room 28). The success of his work earned him international fame among the princely courts of Europe, particularly with Emperor Napoleon I, and his influence was considerable.

Antonio d'Este (1754-1837)* was the pupil of Canova and a fellow Venetian. He worked principally in Rome – he was the director of the Vatican Museums – and developed a style after the Antique inherited from his master. The two busts of *Baron Daru and his Wife** produced during their stay in Rome take up the classic examples of great Roman statuary: clad in togas, with the strands of their hair finely worked, these figures are reminiscent of imperial effigies, while their enigmatic expressions highlight the quality of the sculptor's workmanship. Appointed intendant to the Crown of Rome in 1811, the baron was a key figure in Italian artistic life, a member of the Academy of Saint Luc and friend of Stendhal with whom he shared a passion for Italy.

While Lorenzo Bartolini (1777-1850) was not directly linked to Canova's entourage, he had an important role during the Empire. As the regime's official portraitist, he produced numerous effigies of Napoleon and the imperial family – his portrait of the emperor's sister probably being his most famous (fig.3) – and taught at the Academy of Sculpture decreed by the emperor at Carrara. His *Recumbent Venus** after the painting by Titian is in keeping with the canons of Neoclassicism that he took pains to circulate, yet it also demonstrates the extent to which the great models of the Renaissance remained a source to imitate for this generation of artists.



fig.3- Lorenzo Bartolini
Napoleonic Princess Elisa Bacciochi
 Rennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts
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History Painting in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century

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History painting occupied the highest rank in the hierarchy of pictorial genres decreed by the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. Customarily known as the grand genre, history painting required artists with more assertive qualities of invention and interpretation to depict the heroic acts of kings, the epic deeds of heroes of antiquity, the legends of mythology or the miracles of saints. Unlike in the portrait, still life or landscapes that were considered to be the art of imitation, artists also had to show their scholarly mettle by orchestrating a skilful vision of human or religious history. While the first half of the century fostered a courtly art that drew its subjects from the love affairs of the gods, the light, sparkling style of Lemoyne and Boucher fell into abeyance from the 1750s in favour of a more virtuous art that lauded the moral qualities of the heroes it portrayed.

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Religious Painting at the End of the Ancien Régime

Religious painting occupied an important place up until the French Revolution. Throughout the country many edifices continued to be built and the still lively faith of the population was ever hungry for new devotional images (see Saint Denis, *Birth of the Virgin*, Room 21). Vien (1716-1809) was therefore commissioned to paint *Saint John the Baptist* for the church of La Mercy in Montpellier at the start of his stay at the French Academy ; *Saint Gregory**, created for the church of Saint Louis de Versailles, further testifies to the existence of religious work-sites of paramount importance with a complex iconographical programme ; breaking with the theatrical arrangements of previous years, Vien gave a temperate vision of this church father, visited by the Holy Spirit.

Shortly after his return from Rome (1777 Salon), Vincent (1746-1816) offered a quite different religious vision with his *Saint Jerome in the Desert harking to the Last Trump**. The sense of drama, psychological tension and strongly contrasting light are reminiscent of the Italian Seicento and are perceptible proof of the influence of Guercino and Magnasco on the young painter. His very technique, coarser in style, sets him apart from the smooth manner of Suvée and his is a more ebullient version of Neoclassicism with a greater sense of contrast. Some years later, Vincent was to use a similar composition for his *William Tell and Gessler* (Musée des Augustins, Toulouse) in a formula that he now adapted to a secular, historical subject.

Historical Subjects

It was at the Salon, an official exhibition held regularly since 1746, that developments in art at the end of the eighteenth century were most clearly apparent : the main trends can be traced through the collection of history painting to be seen in this room.

Louis Jean François Lagrenée the Elder (1724-1805), trained under Van Loo, won the Prix de Rome in 1749. His career led him from Rome to Saint Petersburg, gaining him a reputation that would take him to the head of the French Academy. A royal commission, his composition *Apollo and the Oracle** is indeed a work after the Antique : Lagrenée enlivens his composition with models taken from Roman statuary – the Belvedere *Apollo* for the effigy of the god – or archaeological vestiges such as the trivet or ewer and basin unearthed by excavations in Italy during the same period.

Fifteen years his junior, Jean-Jacques Lagrenée the Younger (1739-1821) trained in his brother's studio, thus benefiting from this illustrious family patronage. He also spent time in Rome and, sensitive to the Baroque spirit yet perceptive to antiquity, he was drawn to Poussin, thus placing his art between the rocaille tradition and the classical revival. His *Jubellius Taurea*, presented at the Salon in 1779, is a work still tinged with the canons of the Italian Baroque in its bustling composition, lines and colours, while its subject is a model of virtue

in keeping with the return to the order of pervading classicism. *Coriolanus*, dating to the same year, calls up the same moral register inspired by antiquity, but Vien treats his subject with a formal rigour that is more in line with the times.

A native of Flanders, Joseph Benoît Suvée* (1743-1807) was well versed in French culture ; his prestigious career took him to the head of the French Academy. His painting *Aeneas in the Blaze of Troy* presented at the 1785 Salon bears witness to the will for a complete revival of subjects towards an ideal of greatness and virtue : taken from *Virgil's epic poem the Aeneid*, Aeneas is plagued by the dilemma of whether to fight to save his father or to take flight and protect his son. The sober organisation of the composition, the austerity of the monumental architecture and the narrative repertoire of the poses of the figures match the rigour of the hero's emotion. Beyond these aesthetic values, at the dawn of the French Revolution the painting also advocates an exemplary model of morality at odds with the flightiness of the century of Louis xv and the behaviour of some of the nobility deemed overly licentious.

On the fringe of these great historical compositions, David (1748-1825) acutely bears witness to the new style. With the austere nature of its composition and the timeless scope of its subject, his *Hector**, painted while in Rome, is a precursor of great heroic nudes to come : the *Death of Marat* (1793, Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Brussels) or the *Death of Joseph Barra* (Musée Calvet, Avignon).

François Xavier Fabre, History Painter

While Fabre's (1766-1837) fame as a collector and donor to his native city have long outshone his talents as a painter, he indeed remains one of the best exponents of the Neoclassical movement. Thanks to Joubert, from the age of seventeen he attended one of the best schools of his day, namely the studio of David. Considered as one of the master's most promising pupils, he adopted his severe and realistic style after the Antique. In 1787 he won the Prix de Rome with *Nebuchadnezzar Ordering the Execution of Zedekiah's Children* (fig.1) and left for Italy where he would stay until 1822. Far from the secular rigours of the Revolution and Empire, Fabre was one of the few – if not the only – of David's disciples who delighted in painting both historical and religious episodes.



fig.1- François Xavier Fabre
*Nebuchadnezzar Ordering the
Execution of Zedekiah's Children*
Paris, Ecole Nationale Supérieure
des Beaux-Arts
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His first offering from Rome, the *Roman Soldier** (1788), is an academy figure already painted in a historical register. *Saint Sebastian** (1789) and the *Death of Abel** (1790) affirm this narrative dimension : these large male nudes also recount a heroic drama. The influence of Michelangelo is perceptible in the scale of the bodies writhing in torture, while the organisation of the landscape owes much to the classicism of the Seicento.

With *Susanna and the Elders**, contemporary to *Abel**, Fabre pits himself against the Venetian art of Titian and Veronese (who both treated this subject) and against the work of the Bolognese painters Carracci or Guido Reni. This is also the case with David's model, inspired by his grammar of gesture and expression. His greatest achievement in the domain of the grand genre is probably *Saul and Ahimelech**. Here Poussin's clear legacy – a composition with a frieze of figures and landscape from the Roman countryside – cohabits with the precise lines of forms characteristic of Neoclassical aesthetics. Yet the refined scale of colours and the twilight ambiance that flood the scene and herald Romanticism are products of only Fabre himself.