Cabanel and academism

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Born into a modest family of Montpellier craftsmen – his father was a carpenter – Alexandre Cabanel enjoyed an exemplary professional life : a pure product of academism, his career provides the perfect illustration of what any artist who was part of the Beaux-Arts system could aspire to. As one of the most famous and most admired painters of the nineteenth century, he embodied the ambitions and, to some extent, the limits of the strict tenets of the followers of Ingres. Cabanel lived through most of the century, from the reign of Louis-Philippe until the triumphant Third Republic, spreading the legacy of the Master of Montauban and retaining only its formal prescriptive devices to the detriment of the aesthetic message.

Room Cabanel

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Romanticism and classicism

From 1834 he began his apprenticeship at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Montpellier where he studied drawing with Charles François Matet, who was also curator of the Musée Fabre. Learning his trade in the newly-established institution through contact with artworks which he copied (the museums holds a *Belisarius* after Vincent), he entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1840 and the studio of François-Edouard Picot. Things were hard for him in the beginning : he failed twice at the Prix de Rome, first with *Cincinnatus Receiving Deputies of the Senate** (1843) and then in the following year with *Christ in the Garden of Olives* (Montpellier, Saint-Roch Church). Nonetheless, this work got him noticed and formed his first public success. His *Christ at the Praetorium* (Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts) earned him the second Grand Prix for painting, opening doors for him to the French Academy in Rome where he would stay from 1845 until 1851.

Most of the works in the Musée Fabre date to this period. Here he developed a limpid palette, with the precise and meticulous style carried over from the great classical model embodied by Ingres, who had been the director of the institution in Rome a few years previously. Yet he failed to convince the Academy with the *Fallen Angel** (1847), his "second submission" (an academic exercise traditionally sent to Paris in order to evaluate the young painters' progress) – the figure's Mannerist pose and the Romanticism exuded by the subject probably overstepped the aesthetic mark. With *Saint John the Baptist Preaching** (1849), he found himself up against the grand genre, an essential milestone to gain access to an official career. Loyal to the large religious compositions of Ingres, he constructed a painting with grandiloquent, theatrical effects.

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Over the years, Cabanel became friends with a young collector from Montpellier who was a regular visitor to the Villa Medici in search of new talent – Alfred Bruyas. The *Portrait** (1846) that Bruyas commissioned from him shows the patron aged twenty-four in the mannered pose of a dandy, leaning against a balustrade to the backdrop of the Roman countryside, reminiscent of the model of the cultured traveller made popular by Ingres – *Portrait of François-Marius Granet* (1807, Aix-en-Provence) – and Girodet – *Portrait of Chateaubriand* (1807, Saint-Malo).

Two years later, the triptych *Albayde**, *A Thinker, Young Roman Monk** and *La Chiaruccia**, pondered over at length by both men, would testify to the ambitions of the painter and his sponsor to raise their shared memory of Italy to a more allegorical level. Inspired by Victor Hugo's Les Orientales published in 1829, with her vacant gaze and lascivious indolence, Albayde evokes innocence perverted by carnal sensuality. The contrapuntal *La Chiaruccia* or "little Claire", depicted in Neapolitan dress, sets a picturesque and physical reality against the evanescent charm of the courtesan. The third panel, *Young Roman Monk*, refers to another image of Italy, the land favoured by the Church : set between the two other pictures, it contributes to the cycle's coherence. In the general harmony of the three paintings, the sober nature of the monk's cowl enlivened by the strong hand placed on the cord sash contrasts with the rich chromatic scale of the other figures. The young clergyman, preoccupied by intense inner cogitation, is an expression of the dual nature of choice between two worlds as illustrated by the female pendants to either side. This triptych is also the reflection of the motto coined by Bruyas in those years : "Love, Religion, Work".

Compelled to return to France on the death of one of his brothers (1851), he presented

English translation by Susan Schneider

* An asterisk indicates that the work mentionned is displayed in the room

the *Death of Moses* (Dahesh Museum, New York), his last submission from Rome, at the 1852 Salon ; this would be the beginning of an unending consecration. As demonstrated by the autograph copy displayed here*, on various occasions Cabanel would duplicate the important works of his career so as to circulate the models he created.
*Velleda** marks Bruyas's last large order to the young artist ; displayed at the Salon in 1852, it would be the decisive seal of Cabanel's official destiny. The figure, inspired by the fashion for national Gallic culture – the Romanticism of Chateaubriand revisited – was a theme of choice for nineteenth-century artists in search of new images. Amidst free-flowing nature, she appears as the last guardian of savage, pagan mysteries, springing from a grove in a dramatic orchestration tinged with mystery.

From the 1850s the painter's fame grew, and a clientele in both Europe and America clamoured for his work. He amassed honours, achieving true consecration in 1863 : when his painting the *Birth of Venus* (fig.1) caused a stir at the Salon and was immediately purchased by Emperor Napoleon III, he was appointed to the painting faculty of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and a member of the Institute. In the same year, Manet's *Olympia* would be refused display. Within the official artistic system, Cabanel was moreover one of the great voices against the Impressionist movement, with the notable exception of his young fellow countryman, the painter Bazille.

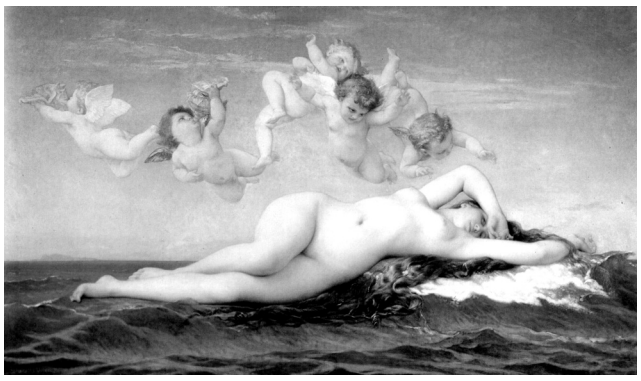

fig.1- Cabanel
Birth of Venus
Paris, Musée d'Orsay
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At the end of his life, Cabanel was the target of harsh criticism that embodied the weight of the convention and the lack of innovation inherent in academic teaching. Indeed, his art with its grandiloquent effects, often described as "pompous", tended towards a less demanding aesthetic, orchestrating a picturesque and indulgent form of history painting, in the style of his *Cleopatra Testing Poisons on Condemned Prisoners*, 1887 (fig.2). *Phedre** would bear the brunt of the most fierce attacks, although the artist considered it to be one of the greatest accomplishments he would give to the museum of his native city. Taking the drama by Racine as its source, Cabanel also paid tribute in this painting to the theatrical world of his day by choosing Sarah Bernhardt as model. While Cabanel's work probably did not deserve Zola's caustic words – "it's an insipid space-filler, a reclining woman who looks quite morose" – with this painting, he embodied the aesthetic weaknesses of a system of which he was one of the most brilliant exponents.

fig.2- Cabanel
Cleopatra Testing Poisons On Condemned Prisoners
Antwerp, Royal Museum of Fine Arts
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