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Book review of Paul Delaroche: Painting and Popular Spectacle by Patricia Smyth

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Book Review

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Patricia Smyth, *Paul Delaroche: Painting and Popular Spectacle* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), 264 pp. \$120 (hardcover)

Paul Delaroche is a nineteenth-century French painter who won both popular and critical attention in the salons of France of the 1830s. Trained by Antoine-Jean Gros, he was associated with Romantics, such as Eugène Delacroix and Ary Scheffer. His early years were marked by institutional success: he was awarded the Légion d'honneur in 1828, then elected as a member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 1832 and in 1833 was appointed professor at the École des Beaux-Arts. However, as his institutional success increased, so did his success with wealthy patrons and his popularity with the public and, in tandem, critics became increasingly hostile. It was his skill in illusionism, above all, that drew the public in. Spectatorship and sensationalism went hand in hand in any discussion of Delaroche, due to the extraordinary impact upon the salon-going public of paintings such as *The Assassination of the duc de Guise* (1835). In this case, the popular appeal of the work caused a dangerous crush around the work; in other cases, such as *Cromwell and Charles I* (1831), contemporary viewers were struck by the dramatic effects. Delaroche is thus central to a discussion of spectatorship in nineteenth-century France. His work can only be discussed in terms of the new types of spectators that emerged during this post-Restoration tumultuous period: popular spectators, who despite having little technical or specialist knowledge about art, were profoundly affected by it.

As Patricia Smyth argues in her fascinating monograph, 'Delacroix and artists like him have posed a fundamental problem of classification for art historians. The discipline tends to categorise artists either with reference to changing political regimes or according to style terms' (207). Delaroche (1797–1856) is most well-known for his *Execution of Lady Jane Grey* (1834), a painting which, while it captured the imagination of the public, was disdained by contemporary critics, including Théophile Gautier, who wrote that 'it was not art at all, but instead literature in disguise, appealing to a philistine majority who want to read a picture like a novel by Walter Scott' (4). Delaroche has been neglected by both French and Anglo-American critics. Normand D. Ziff provided a

landmark study in 1977 (New York: Garland), followed by Stephen Bann's seminal *Paul Delaroche: History Painted* (London: Reaktion, 1997), but criticism on Delaroche has not been forthcoming since. Smyth's book is therefore timely, offering a new way of engaging with the painter that is of interest not only to art historians, but particularly to scholars working on theatre and performance, via an emphasis on the nineteenth-century spectator.

Smyth's book aims to reappraise Delaroche's art and argue for its ongoing relevance via an engagement with illusion, spectacle, and the theatrical. The book is divided into four chapters on 'Illusion and Style in History Painting'; 'Theatricality, Authenticity, and the Expression of Emotion'; 'Narrative Strategy: *The Assassination of the duc de Guise, Henri III et sa cour*, and early nineteenth-century word-image debates'; and 'Afterlives and Legacies: Delaroche's Modernity'. These chapters are framed by a comprehensive introduction and conclusion and the book is beautifully illustrated.

The first chapter considers the evolution of current attitudes towards illusion, before turning to the nineteenth-century debate. Smyth reveals how in the salons of the early nineteenth century 'we begin to see a new kind of picture in which the familiar apparatus of history painting is sacrificed to the creation of an immersive illusionism' (18). Drawing upon scholars such as Jonathan Crary and Stephen C. Pinson, she argues that the 'art and visual culture of this period was understood differently by different audiences' (24). One of the examples Smyth uses to illustrate this is the diorama, where the creation of atmospheric effects was equally pleasing to both high- and low-brow audiences. She cites the critic Auguste Jal, who writes how these large-scale paintings of landscapes or gothic ruins were 'equally pleasing to amateurs, who see in it good painting, as well as gens du monde, who can't help but be affected by optical seductions' (25). Most interesting is the section on emotional spectatorship, an area which has been neglected in art history criticism. Smyth refers to Hobson to tease out the different modes of looking that different viewers engage in and reiterates the need to offer a more inclusive account of how nineteenth-century artworks were received. Discussing Gautier's critical review of Delaroche's 1857 exhibition, she relays how 'Delaroche's self-effacement from his own work is here undone by Gautier's critical vocabulary. His writing not only excludes the non-expert reader, but also impedes the viewer's empathetic engagement by calling attention to technique' (47).

For this reader, however, it is the second chapter that is of most interest. Theatricality has been at the centre of nineteenth-century aesthetics since Michael Fried's influential *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). Smyth takes the unusual stance of positioning Delaroche as anti-theatrical. Challenging Fried, Anne Robbins, and Beth S. Wright – as well as other nineteenth-century critics, such as Gautier, who famously referred to Delaroche as 'the Casimir Delavigne of his time' (73) – Smyth carefully argues, via detailed analyses of nineteenth-century criticism, that Delaroche was actually identified as an artist who 'successfully avoided theatricality and was thus able to engage the emotions of the viewer' (73). Élisabeth Souty's writing on Jane Grey at the Salon of 1834 offers an excellent example: 'There is not one over-the-top expression in this painting, not one of those theatrical attitudes that hurt the eye like a false note hurts the ear. My heart was

beating, and I was dominated by an inconceivable illusion' (74). What Smyth does here is art history at its best: delving into archives and challenging critical perceptions in order to offer a new way of thinking about less fashionable paintings and genres that nonetheless have shaped our visual culture.

This is an excellent monograph which, steeped in nineteenth-century visual and textual culture, allows not only a new perspective on Delaroche and his legacy, but also, more significantly, on the importance of challenging dominant modes of art-historical criticism. The focus on theatre and illusion brings into question Delaroche's art-historical legacy, on the one hand, while his obscured status in nineteenth-century art history reveals the critical disdain for nineteenth-century theatrical and visual culture. Central to the success of Smyth's book is its transdisciplinary focus. She writes that, '[g]iven the parameters of our modern academic disciplines, we continue to view the arts as essentially distinct from one another, so that the blurring of boundaries that is a distinguishing feature of nineteenth-century visual culture is interpreted as a series of incursions into foreign territory or as a form of exchange between different media' (208). Instead, as this book deftly shows, nineteenth-century art history stands only to benefit from a deeper engagement with the multi-modal complexities of the time.