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Claudia Hattendorff

book review of

Der Salon und die Pariser Kunstszenen unter Napoleon I. Kunstpolitik, künstlerische Strategien, internationale Resonanzen by Eva Knels

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Eva Knels,

Der Salon und die Pariser Kunstszenen unter Napoleon I. Kunstpolitik, künstlerische Strategien, internationale Resonanzen.

Hildesheim; Zürich; New York: Olms, 2019.

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The topic of Napoleon and the arts has been widely discussed in art historical literature since the late 1990s. One reason for this was the various Napoleonic anniversaries commemorated at the turn of the millennium. The art administration and the museum system of the early nineteenth century was studied in depth from the perspective of Napoleon's art director, Vivant Denon, whose correspondence was edited in exemplary fashion and to whom a large exhibition was dedicated in the Louvre in 1999.^[1] The history of the Paris Salon during the Consulate and Empire, however, has—with the exception of a few smaller publications—not yet been researched in detail.^[2] Knels' work, based on her doctoral thesis submitted at the Technische Universität Berlin and the Université de Paris IV (Paris-Sorbonne) in 2013, responds to this desideratum and attempts to fill precisely this gap.

The book addresses the practical organization of the exhibition, its conceptual reorientation after 1799, the political intentions associated with the Salon, its social and artistic relevance, and its international scope and reception. With her broad-based investigation, Knels aims to correct the one-sided picture that has prevailed in previous research on the French art scene in the early nineteenth century—namely, that the Salon was primarily an instrument of Napoleonic propaganda (14). Nevertheless, the topic of “art politics/policy” is also the focus of the present study. The author states its goal as follows: “There are two questions at the center of this investigation: on the one hand, the question of the profound change of the Salon, the art policy pursued through it, its protagonists and the works of art exhibited by them in the years 1799 to 1815; on the other, the question of international reception and thus the significance of Napoleonic exhibition policy outside of France” (16).

Based on a wide range of archival holdings, edited sources, and contemporary publications, especially the catalogues published for each individual Salon, Knels' study is devoted to answering the above questions in three large chapters, which in turn show a multipartite

internal structure. The first chapter addresses the organization of the exhibition and its political instrumentalization, the second is devoted to those artists who participated in the Salon, and finally the third to the international resonance of the Paris Salons. Knels maintains this clear, three-part division also in her conclusion at the end of the book, although, according to the author, the connections between the three areas are the focus of her investigation (18–20).

What is the book about in detail? In the first chapter, “The Salon as a Place of the Political,” Knels traces the history of the Paris Salon from 1799 to 1814 as a process involving various agents: artists, political administration, and the art public. She recounts how, from 1800 onward, the number of visitors increased, control of artistic production increased through the use of commissions, and Denon tightened the organization of the Salons, but did not succeed in convincingly internationalizing the exhibition.

The second chapter, “The Salon as a Stage for Artistic Self-Marketing,” discusses artistic developments and trends showcased in the Salon during the Consulate and the Empire. Knels rightly points out that artists belonging to a new French school reigned over the exhibitions while older artists like David made themselves scarce for various reasons. Technically, paintings with an often smooth, fine surface treatment predominated, and the full range of genres was on display. This last point is important. Knels convincingly demonstrates the diversity of work shown at the Salons between 1799 and 1814, both in terms of its subject matter and function. Contemporary foreign perception reduced this diversity to propaganda paintings and to the School of David, a distorted view that has determined the image of the Napoleonic Salons up to the present day. Other sections of the chapter cover female artists and foreign exhibitors. Knels notes that female artists, like their male colleagues, adopted gender-specific subjects and tactics, painting, for example, the fashionable theme of motherhood. Knels also points out that non-French artists in the Salon came mainly from European countries that had come under French influence in the wake of Napoleon’s military conquests.

The third chapter, “Attraction, Reach, Resonances,” deals with the attention that the Paris Salon attracted in the foreign press and from travelers to Paris. As it turns out, foreign tourists rarely mentioned the Salon in their memoirs, and press coverage of the Salon outside France was limited to Germany and England. Knels reads these press reports as a commentary on French politics, and claims that it is precisely for this reason that depictions of contemporary events received special attention. She also examines publications whose main purpose was the illustration of works of art exhibited in the Salon. Knels stresses the fact that the technique of outline engraving frequently used for this purpose promoted a classicist view of art, while at the same time privileging history painting and occasionally genre painting.

There is a major lacuna in this part of Knels’ study: the reader searches in vain for an analysis of French art criticism devoted to the Salon. The genesis of the doctoral thesis forming the basis of this publication possibly provides the explanation for this puzzling fact. It seems very likely that the author originally focused on the reception of the Paris Salons in other European countries and by foreign travelers. Upon discovering that most travelogues say little about the Salon (345), the focus of the Knels’ study seems to have shifted to the history

of the Salon in Napoleonic times as a whole, without, however, adding French art criticism to her inquiry into the reception of the Salon. This shortcoming is exacerbated by the fact that the international response to the Salon outside Germany and England was generally limited.

Because Knels maintains the tripartite nature of her argument in her conclusion, and because she has already provided useful concluding statements to arguments in the body of the book, repetitions and redundancies are unavoidable. At the same time, the author refrains from dissolving the polyphony of the results in favor of a single interpretation of the Paris Salon of Napoleonic times. The merit of the book lies precisely in this polyphony. Knels' study makes it clear that the Salons of the period from 1799 to 1814 are a truly complex phenomenon. A multitude of factors and actors determined the annual or biennial exhibitions, and it is correct to assume no simple causal relationships. The basis for Knels' complex account is the impressive way in which she presents the rich source material on the subject. Unfortunately, there seems to be a problem with the listing of the sources. The text mentions primary texts, which Knels then cites in abbreviated form in the footnotes, but some of these titles are missing from the bibliography (e.g. 49 n. 35 and 36; 51 n. 49; cf. 389–401).

A more serious problem lies elsewhere. The third chapter discusses the reception of the Salon as a theme in its own right. Chapters 1 and 2, on the other hand, encircle the Salon from two closely interwoven perspectives. They evaluate the rich reservoir of primary sources on the Salon and present it first from the perspective of the institution and its administration, then from that of the artists and their art (and do so each time roughly in a chronological order). As a result, Knels examines closely related issues from different perspectives at different points in her book. State control of artistic production and its relation to the Salon is discussed with different emphases in at least seven sections spread over the first and second chapters of the book, leading to tiring repetitions (51–7; 67–70; 95–9; 104–9; 138–46).

Knels shows that official policy focused on two aspects of the Salon in particular. On the one hand, there were the commissions for paintings depicting contemporary events, i.e. Napoleon Bonaparte's political and military exploits (which did not dominate in terms of numbers in the exhibition, but to which a great deal of attention was paid in the media). On the other, there were the paintings, often with similar subject matter, purchased from the Salon. Knels points out that the latter paintings were, like the paintings commissioned in advance by the state, frequently created at the suggestion of Denon. Denon suggested suitable themes in the artistic community and provided sketches that he himself or others had made on site and as eyewitnesses during the French campaigns in Europe. To give just one example: on the occasion of the important peace treaty of Tilsit, which ended the Fourth Coalition War in 1807, the French government commissioned paintings depicting events surrounding the peace treaty, and at the same time purchased paintings that had probably been created at Denon's suggestion, but without commission, after they had been exhibited in the Salon. In addition, oil paintings on the subject were on display in the Salon, which the state refrained from buying after the exhibition closed.^[3] We can therefore assume that the public presentation in the Salon was of paramount importance. In the case of those paintings created at Denon's suggestion, but not at his request, Denon apparently

deliberately waited for them to be displayed in the Salon before making a purchase decision for the government. In this way, he was able to get an impression of the finished product and gauge public opinion before determining whether to spend government funds or not.

The Salon thus played a truly strategic role. This temporary public exhibition was an important forum for assessing the impact and success of a painting. Without the security of a commission, artists produced for the market. A modern capitalist moment thus entered the salon. In the 1790s and early 1800s, government-sponsored competitions had elicited ever decreasing interest from artists and produced unsatisfactory results. Denon more or less eliminated them after he took up his post as museum director and art administrator in 1802. Instead, he used the Salon to vet new works and young talent. Knels concludes: "The dynamics that this kind of art promotion has triggered on the part of art production have hardly been emphasized enough thus far. Again and again, artists turned to Denon to inquire about (Napoleonic) pictorial themes, the depictions of which they hoped to sell to the state" (69). And yet just this dynamic is sometimes lost in Knels' argument. Her analysis of Napoleonic art policies associated with the Paris Salon remains somewhat diffuse, precisely because of its wealth of aspects. Nowhere, for example, is there a pointed discussion of the relationship between official commissions and purchases. A more decisive argumentation and broader historical classifications would have been desirable here and there.

For the final evaluation of this book, however, one fact is all important. At last there is a detailed study of the Salons of Napoleonic times that supplements other research on Napoleon and art, on the early days of art exhibitions in general, and on the history of the Paris Salon in the later nineteenth century. Given the scale and difficulty of the subject, it was hardly to be expected that such a study would satisfy every reader and fully exploit the scope for an interpretation of the primary sources. Without any doubt, Knels' book provides a very solid basis on which future research will rely when addressing the history of the Paris Salon in the years around 1800.

Claudia Hattendorff
Professor of Art History
Justus Liebig University Giessen
claudia.hattendorff[at]kunst.uni-giessen.de

Notes

All translations are by the author of this review.

[1] Vivant Denon, *Correspondance (1802–1815)*, 2 vols, ed. Marie-Anne Dupuy and others (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1999); Marie-Anne Dupuy, ed., *Dominique-Vivant Denon: l'oeil de Napoleon*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 1999).

[2] Pierre Lelièvre, "Le Salon de 1806," *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de l'art français* (1953), 69–75; Bruno Foucart, "Les Salons sous le Consulat et les diverses représentations de Bonaparte," *Revue de l'Institut Napoléon*, 13 (1969), 109–37; Charles Otto Ziesenis, "Napoléon au Salon de 1808," *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de l'art français* (1971), 205–15; Udolpho van de Sandt, "La Fréquentation des Salons sous l'Ancien Régime, la Révolution et l'Empire," *Revue de l'art*, 73 (1986), 43–8; Udolpho van de Sandt, "Le Salon," Jean-Claude Bonnet, ed., *L'Empire des muses. Napoléon, les arts et les lettres* (Paris: Belin, 2004), 59–78.

[3] Claudia Hattendorff, *Napoleon I. und die Bilder. System und Umriss bildgewordener Politik und politischen Bildgebrauch* (Petersberg: Imhof, 2012), 184–95.