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book review of

Le Suicide de Gros: Les peintres de l'Empire et la génération romantique by Sébastien Allard and Marie-Claude Chaudonneret

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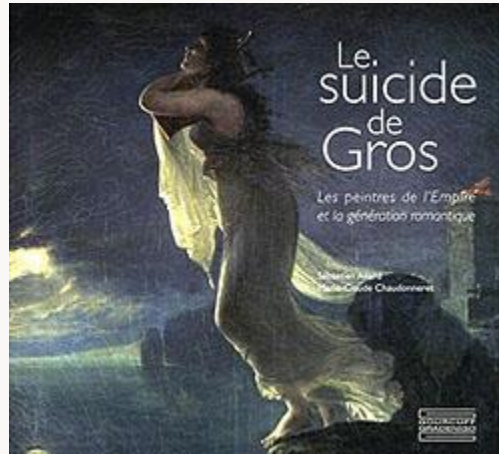
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Sébastien Allard and Marie-Claude Chaudonneret,
Le Suicide de Gros: Les peintres de l'Empire et la génération romantique.
Montreuil, France: Gourcuff Gradenigo, 2010.
159 pp. 60 color illustrations, illustration list, index.
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On June 27, 1835, a couple of fishermen found in the river Seine the corpse of a drowned man, Antoine-Jean Gros, one of the most famous painters of the time. A student of Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) and creator of the most celebrated images of Napoleonic Empire, Gros showed his last paintings at the Salon a few weeks earlier. As a member of the French Academy and *officier de la Légion d'honneur*, he was a respected artist and teacher, and at age 64, he was still healthy. If his “domestic problems” were notorious (but quite ordinary at a time when happily married couples were not that common, especially in the privileged bourgeoisie to which he belonged), he also was known to be a real hedonist.

So why did Gros kill himself?

This is the question that Sébastien Allard and Marie-Claude Chaudonneret ask in this rather concise but richly illustrated book; it should be noted that the book recently received the prestigious literary prize, the Prix 2011 de l'Essai de l'Académie française. Through their analysis of the Gros case, we have a glimpse of the whole configuration of the French art world in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The first clue on which the authors build their argument is Gros's family's attempt to conceal the fact that he committed suicide. The truth was officially established half a century later, in 1880, in Justin Tripiet-Lefranc's biography of the painter.^[1] Indeed, Allard and Chaudonneret show that Gros's contemporaries compared his death with that of Anne-Louis Girodet's (1767–1824), Théodore Géricault's (1791–1824) or Pierre-Narcisse Guérin's (1774–1833), which happened a few years earlier and made a deep impression on so many people in the art world. Through their terrible agony, these three painters, prematurely taken away from their work, became exemplary victims of artists' sometimes cruel destiny. The collective grief following their deaths was actually the illustration

of the new idea that men vowed to art by their vocation—in other words: by divine election—had, like some sort of secular priests, a “mission” to fulfill, an oeuvre to achieve for the sake of humanity.[2] Therefore, if fate decided to put an end to their existence, the public felt frustration and sadness for the masterpiece that could have been, but the dead artists were celebrated as true martyrs. But should the artists choose to kill themselves, disgrace awaited them for having taken from the public something that did not completely belong to them: their vocation and their art. Following this idea, Gros himself blamed his counterpart, the painter Léopold Robert (1794–1835), who committed suicide a few months before he chose to do the same.

Allard and Chaudonneret suggest that by choosing death by drowning, the painter—consciously or not—deprived his family and friends of the ritual of the wake, preventing them from overcoming their grief and paying last honors to him. But, in this perspective, some other reflections can be made. Drowning was indeed, at that time, a very feminine way of ending one's life.[3] Thus Gros appears as a kind of negative reflection of the painter Constance Mayer (1776–1821), who killed herself fourteen years earlier by cutting her own throat (like Léopold Robert); that is to say by opting for a violent and bloody death that was rarely chosen by women and thus gendered in a more “masculine” way. Mayer's death was a very upsetting event for the art world and was illustrated by Eugène Devéria (1805–65) in a lithograph published in the review *L'Artiste* in 1831.[4]

The next chapter, “Les peintres de l'Empire dans la société nouvelle,” is about the violent rupture that the return of the Bourbons to the French throne constituted for history painters of Gros's generation (i.e., born in the 1770s). In this section, Allard and Chaudonneret focus on the very different reactions of these artists (Gros, and his former companions in David's atelier, François Gérard (1770–1837), Guérin or Girodet) to this major political and cultural change, since conditions of artistic production dramatically evolved after 1815. Taking the examples of the *Prix décennal pour la peinture d'histoire* and the 1814 Salon that was crucial for these famous artists, the authors show that, among all, Gros undeniably had the most difficult position. In ten years, he had become a renowned specialist of paintings glorifying Napoleon and French contemporary history. He was therefore not only politically compromised, but also artistically disoriented by the disruption of the very interventionist system of imperial artistic commissions. Its strict supervision of painters was indeed replaced, in the 1820s, by nearly complete freedom in the choice of subjects, by the implicit duty to produce paintings for the Salon, and by the inevitability of a demanding social life—a triple change that did not go well with Gros's inclinations. Although technically admirable, the paintings he produced after 1815 presented “bizarre” or politically awkward subjects that were in complete dissonance with contemporary taste. As a consequence, none of his artworks were exhibited in the Musée du Luxembourg more than a few weeks, when not only his rivals and former companions from David's atelier, but also his own students had theirs shown in this national museum for living artists. Similarly, Gros had to request his election to the Academy and his elevation to the rank of “officer” of the *Légion d'honneur*, whereas such honors were spontaneously granted by the State to Gérard, Girodet, Guérin and even to the younger Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867). Each time, we can easily guess how vivid Gros's humiliation could be.

Ultimately, besides witnessing the end of the artistic system that made him successful, Gros had to deal with the political exile of Jacques-Louis David. Until his former master's death, in

1825, Gros remained deeply devoted to him. In their correspondence, he even appears irresolute and terribly insecure, waiting for David to confirm his pedagogical choices or to make decisions for him concerning the subject for his next painting. If David's shadow was still haunting the art world around 1820, two of his former students were actually dominating it: Girodet was clearly the most consecrated history painter, but his reputation as a teacher was not as good, whereas Gérard was the most influential artist thanks to his official titles and his famous and very selective *salon*. Girodet's death in 1824 and Gérard's forced retirement soon afterwards thus left some room for Ingres: at the end of the 1820s, thanks to his singular style and gifted students, Ingres was the new key figure in the art world. In the last two chapters ("Une génération nouvelle de peintres" and "Les ateliers à l'épreuve du Salon et du musée"), we see how Gros lingered in secondary positions as everyone waited for him to produce a new and significant artwork. In a brilliant exposition of the aesthetic evolution of French battle painting, Allard and Chaudonneret discuss Gros's misconception of popular taste after 1815, when he was still trying to restore a style that critics and younger artists considered completely obsolete. Likewise, at the Salon, Gros kept playing according to the old rules and refused his colleagues's usual trick of opportune delay in the delivering of their main artwork to the exhibition, or their sometimes obvious strategies to win over the critics and the public. According to the authors, his will to stay in the purest Davidian path and fight the Ecole française's "strayings," has something of the nature of a true "artistic courage," which seems rather paradoxical considering the constant doubts and insecurity he showed in his letters to David.

Gros's inflexibility in the transmission of his master's heritage is nowhere clearer than in his own atelier where, beginning in the early 1820s, David's last students gathered after their master's exile. But despite a few successes at the Prix de Rome, Gros's atelier did not achieve the success he and David expected: a lot of young painters, disappointed by his rigid teaching, left for Pierre-Narcisse Guérin's, Louis Hersent's (1777–1860) or Horace Vernet's (1789–1863) more "open" and attractive ateliers. Moreover, the authors show how Gros's conservatism could be seen as an indirect cause of the pensioners's agitation at the French Academy in Rome. These young artists were indeed confronted by the unexpected success of some of their colleagues who had not received the Prix de Rome and, therefore, were still in Paris, where they were advancing in their careers at the Salon. In contrast, these laureates of the most prestigious artistic prize were stuck in Italy for several years, far from the public and the administration, who were forgetting their names and accomplishments. This Prix de Rome's limited devalorization is actually emblematic of the art world's evolution at that time. One of chapter 4's sections, entitled "Le musée, lieu d'émulation et d'émancipation," gives a brief yet limpid description of these mutations.

From the 1830s onwards, Gros had lost most of his students and every Prix de Rome went to Ingres's atelier. The rivalry between the two painters's ateliers was well known, so Ingres's appointment as the director of the French Academy in Rome in 1835, was probably a bitter defeat for Gros, especially since his main painting, *Hercule et Diomède*, for the Salon this same year had not received the critical attention he wished for, and was not acquired by the State. How could he not feel that he failed the mission he made his own, to preserve the Davidian heritage and pass it on to younger generations?

Of course, one will never know with certainty why Gros chose to put an end to his existence. But Sébastien Allard and Marie-Claude Chaudonneret's fascinating inquiry undoubtedly sheds a new light on the art world of the first half of the nineteenth century. *Le Suicide de Gros* is a new kind of biography. Not only does it study only one part of a painter's life (Gros's last twenty years), not only does it focus as much on Gros himself as on the other history painters of his time, but also its core happens to be a question that obviously has no answer ("why did Gros kill himself?"). Starting from a seemingly trivial event for canonical art history—the suicide of an old and obsolete artist—that could have led them into the trap of a pointless psychosocial explanation, Allard and Chaudonneret trust the reader's intelligence by presenting an array of intertwined backgrounds and facts. The aim is not to understand one individual's essentially unexplainable act, but to accurately reconstitute his place in the art world in a given moment of its history. By linking Gros's actions, paintings, or decisions not only to the social and aesthetic context of his time, but also to the actions, paintings and decisions of his main colleagues and rivals, the authors eventually make a meticulous and erudite analysis of the social conditions of artistic production. Since they try to follow the multiple threads that compose an artistic career and the multiple layers forming simultaneously individual and collective histories, Allard and Chaudonneret are compelled to play with chronology and frequently turn back in time, so as to recontextualize each situation. For this reason—and this will be my only reproach to the book—their constant going back and forth in time can be a little tiresome for the reader who sometimes loses the course of time and events. But this flaw is directly linked to the authors's laudable intention to render individual lives in all their complexity. We can thus easily forgive them, especially since we can see both the quasi "experimental" nature of this book, and its most ambitious purpose: showing the deeply human and social nature of Art.

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Notes

[1] Justin Tripier-Lefranc, *Histoire de la vie et de la mort du Baron Gros* (Paris, 1880). Another biography was published on Gros, more than a century after Tripier-Lefranc's: David O'Brien, *Antoine-Jean Gros, peintre de Napoléon* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006).

[2] Paul Benichou, *Romantismes français, vol. I: Le Sacre de l'écrivain; Le Temps des prophètes*, and *vol. II: Les Mages romantiques; L'École du désenchantement* (Paris: Quarto-Gallimard, 2004).

[3] Richard Cobb, *Death in Paris: the Records of the Basse-Geôle de la Seine. October 1795– December 1801* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). At that time, hanging was the most common method of suicide for men, whereas drowning was chosen by a vast majority of women. On this topic, more generally, see Emile Durkheim, *Le Suicide. Etude de sociologie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2007 [1897]).

[4] It would probably be very interesting to study through a gendered frame of analysis, the public's perception of nineteenth-century male and female artists's suicides, especially because suicide became, at that time, a *topos* for artists confronted at the same time by the terrible contradiction of the growing importance of the Salon in artistic careers and by an increase of young artists refused by the jury. For instance, in a petition presented by a hundred famous artists in 1840 at the *Chambre des députés*, the demands for a reform of the selection system at the Salon are based on one example of the jury's unfair decisions: the text mentions "Mademoiselle Camille Eudes", a (probably fictitious) young female painter who supposedly let herself die after

her work had been twice refused by the jury. Archives des Musées Nationaux, série X Salon, 1840, "Pétition des artistes contre les abus du jury."