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book review of

Academic Splendor: 101 Masterpieces from the Dahesh Museum of Art by Alia Nour

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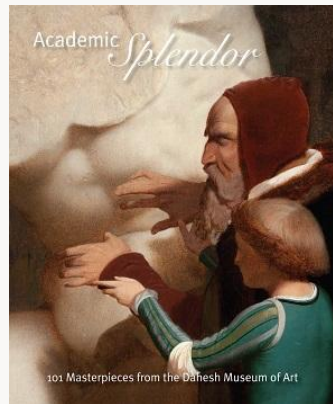
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Alia Nour,
Academic Splendor: 101 Masterpieces from the Dahesh Museum of Art.
New York: Dahesh Museum of Art, 2014.
240 pp.; 131 color illus.; 11 b&w illus.; index of artists; select bibliography.
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In advance of its eventual reopening in New York at its new address, 178 East 64th Street, the Dahesh Museum of Art, a dedicated supporter of The Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art (AHNCA) and *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide*, has published a substantial highlights catalogue entitled *Academic Splendor: 101 Masterpieces from the Dahesh Museum of Art*. Written in an engaging and accessible style by curator Alia Nour, this well researched, smartly designed, and beautifully illustrated book is a welcome addition to an already long list of more specialized publications issued by the museum since its opening in 1995.

It must be said at the outset that such “masterpieces” books, a staple of museum gift shops and targeted at a general audience, are not usually reviewed in scholarly journals. The fact that this catalogue has been written by a single author rather than an institutional team, and that it sustains certain arguments and points of emphasis throughout, however, sets it apart and makes it a good candidate for discussion and debate.

The underlying claim, and one that informs the mission of the Dahesh Museum of Art more generally, is that the museum’s collection of European art is a testament to a once vital, capacious, and adaptable academic tradition that was eclipsed in the twentieth century by a hegemonic modernism, and that it is worth revisiting if we are to understand nineteenth-century art in its fullness and diversity. In its claim for the “splendor” of that tradition, of what has been memorably called “the other nineteenth century,” the museum has been a vocal proponent in revisionist trends in scholarship that ultimately date back to the 1960s, indeed to the moment Dr. Dahesh himself began forming his collection against the grain of dominant

tastes, tastes that still dictate a value-laden separation in the auction market between “Nineteenth Century European Art” and “Impressionist and Modern Art.”^[1]

The question that repeatedly comes to mind in reading this catalogue is the most basic and pressing one of definition. What do we mean when we speak of “academic” art? Nour understands the term, with good reason, primarily as a matter of formal education, of artists’ formation within an institutionalized pedagogical structure of which the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in France is taken as paradigmatic. Dominating the catalogue are indeed works by many artists who followed courses of study at the Ecole, who trained in the private ateliers that fed into it or, after the 1863 reforms, in the ateliers formed directly under its auspices, and who submitted themselves to the rigorous competitions that the Ecole existed in large part to administer. “Academic” in the strictest sense, then, are the works resulting directly from this system, like Jules-Ambroise-François Naudin’s 1841 Prix de Rome competition picture, *Joseph’s Coat Brought Back to Jacob* (cat. no. 14), or Alexandre Cabanel’s *The Death of Moses* from 1851, one of his obligatory *envois* as a Prix de Rome laureate (no. 18a). Alongside such productions, however, we also find works by artists like Henri Fantin-Latour (no. 30) and Léon-Augustin Lhermitte (nos. 48, 49), both of whom studied with Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran, the reform-minded professor at the Ecole Spéciale de Dessin et de Mathématiques (the so-called “Petite Ecole”) whose unorthodox methods, which emphasized memory training, ran counter to contemporary academic norms and attracted many independently-minded artists. We also encounter largely self-taught artists whose beginnings were frankly artisanal, like Constant Troyon (no. 66), who emerged from the artistic milieu of the Sèvres porcelain manufactory and became closely associated with the Barbizon School, whose romantic back-to-nature ethos posed a direct challenge to the contemporary academic establishment. If our notion of the “academic” becomes so flexible as to encompass reformist countercurrents and even artists who found their footing outside the Ecole system, however, then it threatens to become so indistinct and contradictory as to be effectively meaningless.

If “academic” art is understood to be a matter of education and training, it is also a question of artistic emulation, of a conservative respect for tradition and the promotion of a certain canon. The touchstones for the French Academy, as Nour emphasizes, were classical Greek and Roman antiquity and the Italian Renaissance. Needless to say, this canon was far from static in the nineteenth century, and the Dahesh collection reflects the period’s highly eclectic traditionalism; Nour’s individual catalogue entries draw attention to the wide range of post-Renaissance sources artists in fact looked to, whether Dutch, Flemish, Spanish, or French. The implicit suggestion is that any respectful gesture to the artistic past was a fundamentally “academic” one, but here, too, we must be cautious, for to make such a claim would be to minimize the hotly contested battles between “realism” and “idealism,” whose proponents rallied vociferously around traditions that were sharply opposed, and, more generally, to paper over the persistent tension in the nineteenth century between academically sanctioned models (however much those diversified over time with shifting tastes and under generational pressure) and a burgeoning museum culture that offered practically limitless possibilities for self-directed study. Witness the examples of Théodore Géricault, Eugène Delacroix, Gustave Courbet, Edouard Manet, and Paul Cézanne. To be sure the Louvre was always a tremendous resource for the Academy and the Ecole, but it was also always a threat.

If style was to some extent prescribed by the Academy via its models, so too was subject matter, a point Nour underscores by organizing the catalogue according to the traditional academic hierarchy of genres, which ranked history painting at the top and still-life pictures at the bottom. At the same time, in handy introductory synopses she details the major trends and developments within each genre to make room for a wide range of work spanning more than a century. The opening section on history painting, for instance, foregrounds time honored “academic” subjects drawn from classical mythology, the Bible, and ancient history, but also makes generous accommodation for the romantic era’s vastly expanded repertoire of literary and dramatic themes. Nour simultaneously accounts for the many popular and commercial pressures to which the academic hierarchy was subject in the nineteenth century as artists sought to find an audience and market for themselves. The second section thus deviates from the script by admitting the hybrid category of “historic genre” painting, a wildly popular, but critically problematic innovation of the period. And then, inserted somewhat awkwardly between the “Landscape and Animals” and “Still Life” sections, Nour devotes a large section to Orientalism, an extremely broad category of cultural investigation that interrupts the catalogue’s overarching structure by cutting across an array of genres and media.

Ultimately, the unruly diversity of the Dahesh collection, much like that of our period more generally, can only imperfectly be marshaled into the categories theorized by the Academy. In attempting to do so, however, Nour draws the reader’s attention to the museum’s real strengths and its inevitable biases. Despite the dramatic ascendancy in the nineteenth century of portraiture, genre, and landscape, and the death knell for *grande peinture* many commentators felt it tolled, these play a relatively minor role here and are kept in a clearly subordinate position to history painting. One is tempted to draw an analogy with the conservative mid-century critics who persisted in following the traditional genre hierarchy in their extensive Salon reviews, even in the face of a pervasive and widely recognized redistribution of talents.

It is hard in the end to escape the conclusion that a collection like that of the Dahesh Museum is much more strongly defined by its exclusions than by any stable or consistent definition of “academic” art. Extremely diverse in subject matter and spanning poles of naturalism and idealism, romanticism, and classicism, and draftsmanly and painterly modes of working, the museum’s collection of European art includes artists of different levels of formal training and from different national contexts who followed different career trajectories (a diversity that is accentuated by the seemingly random, non-chronological arrangement of works within each section of the catalogue). Perhaps what binds them most in Nour’s telling is the significant amount of professional, critical, popular, or commercial success they achieved during their lifetime. The catalogue entries consistently rehearse the artists’ exhibition records, their high-profile commissions, official honors, prestigious posts, or lucrative market ventures. Such success does not necessarily an “academic” artist make, but emphasizing it is a classic strategy of a revisionist art history intent upon departing from the modernist and avant-gardist narratives with their clichéd tropes of rejection, struggle, resistance, and posthumous vindication.

As passionate and partial in its collecting as it is in its serious scholarly endeavors, the Dahesh Museum offers an alternative, yet admittedly still Francocentric, view of nineteenth-century European art, a view that runs counter to the one still privileged by most major museums in the United States, including that of the Getty Museum where this reviewer serves as a curator.

While still reflecting the particular tastes of Dr. Dahesh, his eponymous museum also succeeds, by celebrating artists such as William-Adolphe Bouguereau (no. 46), Jean-Léon Gérôme (nos. 34, 39, 40), Jehan-Georges Vibert (no. 52), Hermanus Koekkoek the Elder (no. 57), and Rosa Bonheur (nos. 61, 62), in hearkening back to a late nineteenth-century chapter in the history of American collecting when, prior to the influx of Impressionism, the picture of modern European art looked remarkably different than it does today.

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Notes

[1] Louise D'Argencourt and Douglas Druick, eds. *The Other Nineteenth Century: Paintings and Sculpture in the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph M. Tanenbaum* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1978).