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Michael Marrinan, *Romantic Paris: Histories of a Cultural Landscape, 1800-1850*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009. xviii + 467 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 10: 0804750629; \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 10: 0804761515.

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The publication of Michael Marrinan's *Romantic Paris: Histories of a Cultural Landscape, 1800-1850*, will one day, I predict, be regarded as something of a watershed event in the historiography of early nineteenth-century French art and culture. The first serious, sophisticated overview of its subject to appear in many years, it has the breadth of a traditional textbook combined with the interpretive depth and methodological ambition of more specialized studies. Operating productively on several levels simultaneously, Marrinan's text has something to offer everyone, from undergraduates discovering the allures of Paris for the very first time to seasoned *dix-neuviémistes* whose sustained concentration on isolated aspects of post-Revolutionary French history and culture may have caused them to lose sight of the larger picture to which their objects of study belong.

Marrinan lays out the philosophical and methodological foundations for his study in the "Introduction." He proposes to examine early nineteenth-century Paris not as a mere geographical entity—a conglomeration of architectural solids and voids that simply contain or frame its occupants—but rather as a multi-layered and dynamic, constantly reproduced and renegotiated "social space" emerging from the practices and relations of the people who inhabit it. The complexities of this particular sense of place, which Marrinan derives from the French sociologist Henri Lefevre,^[1] undergirds the equally complex structure of *Romantic Paris*, which is not only interdisciplinary but multi-dimensional and multi-directional as well. In defiance of what he calls conventional "straight-line narrative," Marrinan has constructed his book as a collection of intersecting histories, through which he attempts to "break down the illusion of a mastering voice by inviting readers to explore the material in different sequences and by means of personalized zigzags" (pp. 2-3).

This is a complex and ambitious strategy; it is also a risky one, as it sets out purposefully to deprive readers of the kinds of markers and guideposts that normally lead them through historical texts. *Romantic Paris* is only episodically chronological; it also encompasses a broad array of varied and perhaps even disparate thematic foci, ranging from Salon painting to book illustration, monumental architecture to industrial design, palace politics to boulevard theatre. Appreciating such a text requires not so much an "advanced" or experienced reader—i.e., one already familiar with the material under discussion—as an attentive and engaged one: a reader, in short, who is willing to expend the effort necessary to negotiate the varied themes and shifting perspectives characterizing *Romantic Paris*, thereby discovering the sometimes indirect transitions and latent connections that make the book cohere.

If Lefevre provided Marrinan with the theoretical conceptualization of the fundamental subject of his book—the "social space" that was Paris between the Napoleonic coups d'état of 1799 and 1851—the radically wide-ranging, disparate content and episodic, anti-narrational structure of

the text is classic Walter Benjamin. Indeed, it is difficult at times to resist the feeling that *Romantic Paris* was conceived as a kind of fleshing-out of the German theorist's famously fragmentary and meandering, unfinished masterpiece, *The Arcades Project*,^[2] especially in those sections in which Marrinan wanders off the more familiar paths of art and architectural history to consider such things as restaurants and omnibuses, domestic interiors and, of course, shopping arcades. Also decidedly Benjaminian are instances in which Marrinan sets out self-consciously to read "against the grain," extracting out of familiar historical data and scenarios evidence of impulses that resist or subvert the dominant ideological constructs in which they were originally situated.^[3] Many of the most interesting instances of this involve issues of gender. The fifth image in the book is a relatively obscure painting by a female artist: Constance Charpentier's deeply private, emphatically introspective *Melancholy* of 1801 (Amiens, Musée de Picardie), which Marrinan interprets as emblematic of a strain of "frankly feminine" resistance to the "masculine ethos of aggressive military conquest" dominating official culture during the First Empire (p. 16). Marrinan goes on to posit Charpentier's painting, together with the controversial but hugely influential writings of Madame de Staël and the propensity for increasingly private, personalized (and often erotic) subject-matter among early nineteenth-century French artists in general, as evidence of "an ethic of empowered femininity" (p. 16) informing pictorial and literary Romanticism in France.

While the detection of "feminine" impulses in Romantic cultural expression is hardly revolutionary, foregrounding (and frankly heroizing) such tendencies to this extent is unusual and sets the tone for the imaginative reinterpretations and provocative shifts of emphasis that characterize much of the rest of the book. Clearly impatient with tendencies to read all manifestations of "Orientalism" as automatically, inescapably oppressive and/or exploitative of "the exotic other," for example, Marrinan proposes an alternative reading of Delacroix's celebrated *Women of Algiers* (1834; Paris, Musée du Louvre) as a non-voyeuristic, non-sexualizing, quasi-sociological exploration of the actual lifestyles of real Algerian women derived from the artist's firsthand experiences in the East—this in contrast to the wholly fantastical and shamelessly exoticizing visions of the harem served up by more conventional Orientalists such as J.-A.-D. Ingres. Whether or not one is wholly convinced by the particularities of Marrinan's argument, which turns on his alignment of Delacroix's painting with the supposedly empathetic, non-eroticizing reportage of contemporary *female* travelers in the East,^[4] one can only admire his desire to escape the interpretive inflexibility that programmatic adherence to the Saidian theory of Orientalism often entails.^[5]

The first chapter of *Romantic Paris* is largely concerned with the cultural and especially artistic ramifications of the rise and fall of Napoleon Bonaparte. Marrinan begins with a detailed analysis of David's *Napoleon Crossing the Saint-Bernard Pass* (1801; Malmaison, Châteaux de Malmaison et de Bois-Préau), which he sees as exemplifying the brand of "pure hero worship" (p. 8) that official imagery of the Empire was destined to promote. Marrinan then goes on to consider how this propagandistic agenda could falter under the pressures of the complicated social and political realities of the First Empire via an examination of several of the most celebrated battle paintings that were produced in such numbers throughout Napoleon's reign. As Marrinan's analysis reveals, the propagandistic nature of these paintings (and sometimes even their pictorial and visual logic) was often compromised by startlingly graphic descriptions of the carnage of the battlefield—gory passages that seem geared less towards generating support for the war effort than reminding Parisians of the rising toll that Napoleon's military ambitions were having on the nation. Chapter one concludes with a highly nuanced reading of what is certainly the most iconic representation of extreme human suffering from the Romantic era: Théodore Géricault's post-Imperial *Raft of the Medusa* (1819; Paris, Musée du Louvre), which Marrinan convincingly presents as the allegory of a desperate, depressed, and rudderless nation set adrift by the stinging humiliations of military defeat and foreign occupation.

As will be the case throughout the volume, Marrinan's discussions of all these pictures are detailed and in-depth, both in terms of visual analysis and historical interpretation. Here too we encounter what will become one of the most prominent tendencies throughout *Romantic Paris*—that of reading ambitious works of art primarily in terms of their ideological import. While this interpretive strategy might seem a bit out-of-step with several recent, “high-profile” studies emphasizing more broadly psychic and/or sociological as opposed to strictly political interpretations of the art of the period,[6] ideological analysis remains a pertinent—indeed, necessary—means of understanding the cultural production of this most politically fraught and unstable of eras, and Marrinan's example, which balances extensive empirical research (a good deal of it original) with imaginative but careful, historically responsible interpretive speculation, provides an instructive model of how to go about this.

In the second and third chapters, Marrinan turns to the cityscape of Paris itself, focusing on how the metropolis was continuously reshaped by the political tumult of the first half of the century. Much of this discussion, especially in chapter three, is centered on relating detailed factual information regarding the physical transformations of individual sites and monuments (e.g., the Arc de Triomphe, the Pantheon, the Vendôme Column, the Place de la Concorde) carried out at the behest of successive political regimes. At issue here is the impact of the unprecedented acceleration of the pace of history inaugurated by the French Revolution, a situation that led Marrinan to frame his discussion of the ever-evolving cityscape with an appeal to the interrelations between memory and history elaborated several decades ago by the influential French historian Pierre Nora.[7] As Marrinan perceptively observes, the distinction between these two phenomena was perhaps never more difficult to maintain than in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and he argues persuasively that political authorities, through the careful orchestration of official ceremonies or the physical transformation of symbolically loaded sites and monuments, sought to “stage” memory as a means of reconfiguring history into a legitimating force that could shore up their own contested authority to rule.

Where Marrinan is able to make this interplay between memory and history assert itself most potently, however, is in his interpretations of individual artistic commemorations of specific political events. His reading, for instance, of the various pictorial gaps and fissures characterizing David's notoriously problematic *Distribution of the Eagles* (1810; Versailles, Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon) as a manifestation of the artist's personal struggle to come to terms with his own checkered political history and shifting ideological allegiances is both convincing and poignant. Similarly, Marrinan's interpretation of the famously mixed critical reaction elicited by Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1831; Paris, Musée du Louvre)—a canvas that was exhibited within a year of the revolution it commemorates—as a matter of the critics' inability to reconcile the seemingly conflicting dictates of memory (as represented in the pockets of grisly realism punctuating the picture) with those of history (as encapsulated in the painting's elevating, allegorizing title figure) is, within the context of the larger arguments featured in this section of the book, positively masterful.

After an illuminating, if largely factual, examination of the various manifestations of medievalism in early nineteenth-century Paris in chapter four (e.g., Alexandre Lenoir's Musée des monuments français, the vogue for “troubadour” painting, the Gothic revival in architecture and interior design), Marrinan undertakes a lengthy consideration of the art world in chapters five and six. Inevitably, these chapters focus on the emergence of Romanticism in the pictorial arts. Many of the themes touched upon here will be familiar to specialists: the turn towards violent, melodramatic, and supposedly ignoble subject-matter in monumental history painting; the growing preoccupation with exotic and Orientalist themes; the rise of naturalism in landscape and eventually in figure painting.

Indeed, one of the real strengths of this book, as I see it, is Marrinan's willingness to leave good enough alone—to accept (and, of course, fully to credit) the work of previous scholars that continues to hold explanatory power. Marrinan's discussion of Orientalism, for instance, makes productive use of insights contained in the famous article by Linda Nochlin in which the fundamental components of Saidian cultural analysis were first brought to bear on art history;[8] his discussion of naturalistic landscape painting is built upon the groundbreaking work of the late Nicholas Green;[9] and his discussion of the early career of Gustave Courbet derives from the revolutionary—and still-unsurpassed—work on this artist by T.J. Clark.[10] Not that this section of the book is without original insight—far from it. Marrinan makes the best case yet for the writings of Victor Hugo in general, and the famous "Preface" to *Cromwell* (1827) in particular, as the theoretical foundation stone of pictorial as well as literary and theatrical Romanticism. Indeed, Marrinan presents Delacroix's paradigmatically "Romantic" *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827; Paris, Musée du Louvre) as a more-or-less programmatic attempt to realize in paint several of the most controversial precepts and recommendations put forth in Hugo's "Preface," most notably its defiance of the unities of time and place and its celebration of the grotesque.

In the end, however, it is not so much the influence of these rather arcane theoretical and aesthetic debates that Marrinan regards as determining the principal drift of artistic production in Paris during the Romantic era, but rather the emergence of a massively expanded and decidedly heterogeneous population of cultural consumers. With regards specifically to painting, the key development here was the ever-growing crowds of Parisians who elbowed their way into the (beginning in 1833) annual exhibitions of contemporary art in the Louvre—the celebrated "Salons"—as well as the growing ranks of professional critics charged with assessing these displays for a decidedly non-specialist audience in the periodical press. And in this respect, it is not Delacroix who emerges as the most innovative, indeed "revolutionary" artist of the Romantic period, but rather Paul Delaroche, whose elaborate painted machines, featuring unabashedly theatrical subjects executed in jaw-dropping detail and mesmerizing precision, never failed to captivate the crowds. As Marrinan convincingly argues, the impact of these paintings derives not from their positioning vis-à-vis contemporary aesthetic and theoretical controversies (e.g., line versus color or classicism versus Romanticism—art historical categories that have little if any real purchase on Delaroche's art), but rather from the similarities of their narrative structures and visual effects to such things as melodrama, panoramas, and wax-works displays—supposedly "popular" (although not always cheap) or "low-art" spectacles that were just then emerging as widespread forms of urban entertainment.

Salon painting is not the only art form Marrinan presents as having been fundamentally altered by the breakdown of traditional social and cultural hierarchies of the immediate post-Napoleonic era. Romantic theatre was similarly subjected to a blurring of distinctions between high and low, as the conventions of popular boulevard theatre (e.g., ever-more elaborate sets and costumes, special effects, and dramatic action as opposed to recitation) invaded and gradually came to dominate the classical stage. Such is the context for Marrinan's detailed examination of that most legendary of all nineteenth-century theatrical *succès de scandale*: the debut of Hugo's *Hernani* at the Comédie-Française in February 1830. In what I found to be one of the most original and potentially "game-changing" sections of the book (the discussion actually spans chapters six and seven), Marrinan likewise charts the effects on portraiture of increasingly ubiquitous forms of mechanical reproduction—most particularly lithography—in tandem with the emergence of a peculiarly modern brand of celebrity brokered by the burgeoning mass media. Marrinan argues that the commissioning of conventional oil-on-canvas portraits for display at the Salon—a practice that came to be regarded as paradigmatically "bourgeois" (that is to say vulgar) by many of the more high-minded artists and critics of the day—was actually a

rear-guard maneuver predicated on notions of social status and personal identity that were becoming increasingly difficult to regulate and control as the century progressed.

In contrast to this mode of antiquated self-commemoration, Marrinan posits mechanically reproduced and/or mass-distributed portraits of celebrities (e.g., lithographic portraits published in newly established cultural magazines, the celebrated medallions of David d'Angers) as introducing a specifically modern form of portraiture, one that functioned not so much to bestow a specific status or character on sitters as to accommodate the imaginative projections of viewers, the majority of whom would have had no direct, first-hand experience of the personages represented. Meaning in these portraits—as in modern imagery generally—thereby becomes fluid and unfixed; it is less a matter of artistic intention and production than of viewer/consumer fantasy and reception. While readers might find some of the details of this provocative and wide-ranging analysis to stand in need of further elaboration, the fact that Marrinan paints with such a broad brush in this instance is ultimately a great advantage. For even though there has long been a general acknowledgement among specialists that an important shift occurred in French portraiture in the years around 1830, work on the genre remains mired in over-specialized studies of individual artists and/or sitters that do little to advance our understanding of the operations of portraiture *as a whole* during this period. Marrinan's analysis offers one promising route out of this impasse.

In chapter seven, Marrinan widens his scope considerably, shifting his focus from the intricacies of the Parisian art world to urban life more generally. He continues to be concerned with the effects of eroding hierarchies, however, concentrating his analysis on the emergence of cultural practices and social spaces that he regards as defying established “class, professional and political affiliations” (p. 271). Paramount among these are those two most celebrated icons of early nineteenth-century urban life: the shopping arcades or *passages* and the *flâneur*. Inevitably, Marrinan's treatment of these entities remains deeply indebted to the inescapable precedent of Benjamin, although he proves his theoretical chops more broadly by bringing the writings of Louis Wirth, Richard Sennett, and Guy Debord to bear on the discussion as well. This theoretical variation, together with Marrinan's treatment of less thoroughly studied phenomena such as the awkward social relations that emerge from dining in restaurants and riding in omnibuses, produces an analysis that is simultaneously broad and deep, providing basic coverage of some of the most fundamental sociological developments of the period—e.g., the polarization of public versus private life, burgeoning consumerism and urban alienation, the rise of the nuclear family—for the neophyte, while offering veterans of the field fresh perspectives and ample scholarly food for thought.

Burgeoning industrialization provides the focus for the eighth and final chapter of *Romantic Paris*. Here Marrinan offers useful overviews of such important but relatively understudied phenomena as the rise of quasi-mechanically produced and affordable bibelots and home furnishings; the evolution of publishing and book illustration; the development of lithography; and, finally, the invention and popularization of the daguerreotype. A considerable portion of this chapter is also given over to an analysis of the effects of industrial materials and mechanized construction techniques on monumental architecture. Here Marrinan's analysis comes to focus on what is arguably the single greatest piece of French architecture of the first half of the century: Henri Labrouste's Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, completed in 1850. Marrinan's extended treatment of this remarkable building serves as a kind of summation of many of the major themes of his text. As an institution catering to students of the Latin quarter, many of whom could not afford to buy their own books, the library exemplifies the kind of fluid and diverse, quasi-democratizing social space Marrinan regards as one of the signature innovations of the Romantic age. As a building that incorporates some of the most advanced materials and building techniques of its time—an iron skeleton and off-site modular

fabrication—within an ultra-traditional envelop of cut-stone masonry (albeit with the classical orders and other forms of conventional architectural decoration removed), Labrouste's masterpiece also represents an imaginative negotiation of tradition and innovation that similarly typifies Marrinan's characterization of this most transitional of eras.

And then there is the issue of the enduring influence of the man who in many ways is the single greatest protagonist of *Romantic Paris*—the one in whose writings French Romanticism received its most complete and most brilliant expression: Victor Hugo. In a famous chapter of *Notre-Dame de Paris* entitled “Ceci tuera cela” (“This will kill that”), Hugo argued that the invention of the printing press rendered architecture obsolete as a form of meaningful cultural expression. Some decades ago, Neil Levine identified the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève as Labrouste's response to this assertion, one that attempted not so much to contest the cultural obsolescence of traditional architecture as to reinvent the art form in accordance with the structural and formal logic of the book.[11] This reading fits in well with the overall interpretive schema of *Romantic Paris*, and Marrinan mobilizes it effectively, fortifying Levine's analogy between the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève and the printed volume with a number of new insights and observations, such as the visual similarity of the central colonnade in the library's main reading room to the spine of a book. I also found the passages devoted to Sainte-Geneviève to be particularly revealing of Marrinan's considerable talents as a writer, combing analytic incisiveness and precision of detail with a tone of unbridled enthusiasm that makes the entire book as enchanting as it is informative.

As a physical object itself, *Romantic Paris* is a most handsome volume. Its design is elegantly understated. The illustrations are abundant and of general good quality, albeit exclusively in black-and-white. While this eschewal of color, together with the author's obvious penchant for old, nineteenth-century photographs of urban views and architectural monuments, entails a certain sacrifice in terms of visual exactitude and clarity, it imparts to the book a kind of historical patina—perhaps even a hint of melancholic nostalgia—that is wholly in keeping with its content. These old and somewhat ghostly photographs remind us that, all its incipient modernity and contemporary reverberations notwithstanding, *Romantic Paris* is fundamentally and irretrievably a thing of the past. We can thus be doubly appreciative of the tremendous intellectual skill and imaginative effort Marrinan brought to his careful—if inevitably partial and selective—recreation of this endlessly fascinating time and place.

NOTES

[1] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicolson-Smith (London: Blackwell, 1991).

[2] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press—Harvard University Press, 1999).

[3] Most pertinent here is Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History* (New York: Classic Books America, 2009).

[4] Here Marrinan's analysis relies on Billie Melman's influential study, *Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918* (London: Macmillan, 1992).

[5] The key text here, of course, is Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

[6] Here I am thinking most particularly of Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, *Necklines: The Art of Jacques-Louis David After the Terror* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999) and Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

[7] Pierre Nora, "Entre Mémoire et Histoire," in Pierre Nora ed., *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984) I, pp. i-xlii.

[8] Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," in Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), pp. 33-59.

[9] Nicholas Green, *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth-Century France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

[10] T.J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982).

[11] Neil Levine, "The Book and the Building: Hugo's Theory of Architecture and Labrouste's Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève," in Robin Middleton ed., *The Beaux-Arts and Nineteenth-Century French Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), pp. 138-78.

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