

H-France Review Vol. 15 (November 2015), No. 155

Alexandra Stara, *The Museum of French Monuments 1795–1816: ‘Killing art to make history.’* Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013. 183 pp., 38 b. & w. illus. \$104.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4094-3799-4.

Review by Keith Bresnahan, OCAD University.

Closed by official decree almost precisely two hundred years ago, Alexandre Lenoir’s Musée des Monuments Français (or “Museum of French Monuments”) remains a prominent reference in histories of French Revolutionary culture, as well as those of museums and collecting. However, the institution and its director arguably remain little known, and mired in standard narratives. To wit, two images of longstanding provenance prevail in the popular interpretation of Lenoir; the first of these, cemented by the well-known image that also graces the cover of Alexandra Stara’s new book, has him as an ardent preserver of French art and historic monuments, vainly defending the royal tombs at Saint-Denis against vandal hordes. The second, more common in museological studies, paints Lenoir as an opportunistic amateur who manipulated these artifacts to his own personal ends, and the Musée itself as a hodgepodge of historical inaccuracies and flat-out fabrications.

Stara’s study, which traces the history and significance of this Parisian institution from its origins in the early 1790s to its premature closure in 1816, aims to correct both of these misconceptions, in providing a more fulsome account of Lenoir and his Museum. A fuller consideration of this topic is both welcome and long overdue: Stara’s study is, its opening pages remind us, the first book devoted to this topic since Louis Courajod’s authoritative three-volume tome *Alexandre Lenoir, Son journal et le Musée des Monuments Français* (Paris, 1878–87). At the same time, Stara’s book contributes to a small but excellent body of scholarly literature that has deeply revised our understanding of the Museum and Lenoir in recent years, in works by (among others) Jennifer Carter, Christopher Green, Francis Haskell, Andrew McClennan, Édouard Pommier, and Dominique Poulot, all of whom appear in these pages.

Born out of a temporary *dépôt* housing expropriated art and sculptural fragments at the former convent of the Petits-Augustins on the Left Bank in Paris, the Museum of French Monuments was very much a project of Lenoir, from 1791 the prime mover behind its conversion to a permanent museum. At this site, granted official standing in 1795, Lenoir showcased a narrative of French history through the chronological display of sculptural works and architectural fragments. An introductory hall at the museum’s beginning familiarized visitors with the entire course of French art from its Celtic origins to the present; moving from here into the thirteenth-century gallery housing tombs of Merovingian kings, the visitor progressed through a sequence of rooms *en enfildade*, each with its own character and particular atmosphere corresponding to the stylistic attributes on display. The eighteenth-century gallery, reflecting Lenoir’s own time, contained specially commissioned busts of celebrated artists, thinkers, and political figures, in a commemorative display that continued in the Elysium garden (*Jardin d’Elysée*) at the museum’s end. This last was a contemplative space situating fabricated tombs of Descartes, Rousseau, and Héloïse and Abelard, among others, within the verdant growth of a *jardin anglais*.

Stara's central argument, carried out over five thematic chapters, is that the organization and display of the Museum's diverse rooms and collections reflected a coherent and consistent historical perspective, and that the Museum itself constituted a significant intervention into this period's complex understanding of tradition, history, and identity. At the Museum, groups of artifacts—detached from their prior existence in traditional settings and ritual contexts—were systematically arranged for public viewing; thus “unencumbered by the possible residues of... [their] previous existence” (p. 9), Stara writes, these objects could be given new meanings and henceforth serve as “building blocks for the construction of the new history and identity of the nation” (p. 92). It was precisely this detachment of these objects from their traditional settings and contexts, and the imposition onto them of new meanings, that motivated the trenchant critique of the Museum by the academician Quatremère de Quincy, who described Lenoir's work in the phrase that forms the subtitle to Stara's book (“killing art to make history”), and who was almost certainly responsible for its permanent closure in 1816.

Stara's study proposes an innovative reading of Lenoir's historical approach at the Museum with which future scholarship will have to contend. It is also ultimately a frustrating work, its arguments hampered by a somewhat disjointed structure and above all by its overarching motivation: to defend Lenoir and the Museum against their critics. Stara's description of Courajod's work, as “effectively an extensive apologia, in response to the controversy that had plagued [the Museum] throughout its short life” (p. 11), could without any difficulty be applied to her own book. This is especially clear in the book's treatment of Quatremère in its final chapters, which illustrate the paradox of Stara's study: on the one hand, this section provides a valuable close reading of Quatremère's critical writings on museums and national patrimony, showing him to have held a much more nuanced view on these matters than is generally afforded by the image of him as a simple “museumophobe.” On the other hand, it is ultimately undermined by a determination to read the two as unrealized allies, and to posit Lenoir's position as vindicated by necessity and history—a conclusion that comes at the cost of reducing the complexity and potential legitimacy of these historical counter-arguments.

In the first, largely descriptive chapters, Stara rehearses a familiar narrative of the Museum's history and its collections that, while correct in itself, misses the opportunity to expand beyond a somewhat conventional reading by engaging with the larger historical contexts at play here, and with some relevant secondary literature. Stara's discussion of revolutionary vandalism fails to note the recent crop of writings shifting our understanding of this development, while her discussion of emotionality in the experience of the Museum would have benefitted from reference to the rapidly-expanding literature on sentiment and sensibility in Enlightenment culture, which may have helped avoid some questionable assertions here, for instance that Lenoir's embrace of “sentiment, curiosity, and ambiguity... [placed him] well beyond the Enlightenment canon”(p. 106). Given Stara's emphasis on the Museum's role in the construction of national identity, it is also surprising to find little explicit discussion of the vast body of scholarship on Revolutionary material culture and its role in this process, which has been one of the strongest currents in French Revolutionary scholarship for some three decades—and which would have helped significantly to position Lenoir's project as part of a widespread engagement with the power of material artifacts in the shaping of historical consciousness.[1]

Stara's extended discussion of Lenoir's dozen or so published catalogues correctly identifies these as tools by which Lenoir aimed to secure and protect the Museum from interference, as well as being “guides” to the experiential dimension of the space. It is curious, however, that she does not devote any space here either to Lenoir's specific use of language in these documents, or their existence as artifacts in their own right, participating in the period's rapidly expanding field of publications on art and exhibitions.[2] How did these catalogues fit into period conventions for describing works of art in print, for instance, or traditions for cataloguing and classifying collections? Finally, while Stara specifically highlights the use of images in one of Lenoir's publications, the striking engravings of the Museum that are reproduced in Stara's book are not directly addressed in any way, and are furthermore

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derived from two publications (the *Souvenirs du Musée des Monuments Français* and the *Vues pittoresques et perspectives des salles du Musée des Monuments Français*) that are not mentioned anywhere in the text.

If Stara's study too often presents Lenoir as an "enterprising guardian" and "intrepid curator" (p. 16), or a heroic preserver of French history, it also productively and intriguingly complicates the model of history at work in the Museum. Rather than the promoter of what Louis-Sébastien Mercier regarded as "a monotonous and insipid regularity" (pp. 79-80) imposed by rational chronology, Lenoir appears here as advancing a complex historical approach embracing of ambiguity, contradiction, pastiche, and play. Largely developed in chapter three of the book, this interpretation draws on a wide range of theoretical interlocutors including Hans Blumenberg, Paul Ricoeur, and Reinhart Koselleck, to interpret Lenoir's work at the Museum as an ongoing and dialectical process of "mythopoetic" invention, the Museum's various spaces weaving together fragments "in an open composition that did not present a definitive version of anything, but rather relied on the visitors' participation in order to piece itself gradually, as an ongoing metaphor" (p. 114). The "mythopoetic" dimension of Lenoir's work has been noted by others (Poulot, particularly) but Stara's expansion of it here provides her with a novel means of reassembling the various and self-evidently contradictory elements of Lenoir's project. Stara also notes, without fully developing, other sources for Lenoir's perspective—including his Freemasonic and antiquarian intellectual circles. But another influence was surely the rapidly shifting political regimes of the Museum's short existence, which would have validated (if not specifically encouraged) Lenoir's refusal of final judgments on history, and which certainly facilitated his sense of culture and identity as subject to ongoing construction.

Stara's emphasis on emotionality and theatricality in the Museum is one of the most promising aspects of the book, demonstrating Lenoir's overriding concern to have been less an adherence to strict chronological history than the communication of historical style through atmosphere and mood. At the same time, we need more here on how these emotional effects were achieved, and the emotional discourses within which they operated: if the "decorative ebullience" of the fourteenth-century hall succeeded "in conveying the atmosphere of the century," or "dramatic" and "vivid" pieces in the seventeenth-century hall "added to the impact of the room" (p. 67), it's unclear how specifically this worked, and more importantly to what extent these associations played on (or against) contemporary ideas among Lenoir's presumed audience. The Elysium garden, often seen as incongruous to the whole of the Museum, benefits strongly from this emphasis on emotionality, as do Lenoir's notorious *fabriques*, imaginative reconstructions of historic monuments from diverse fragments and newly-commissioned material. Rather than as patent frauds, these curious objects—including the Museum's most popular exhibit, Lenoir's fabricated "tomb" of Héloïse and Abelard—appear in Stara's narrative as theatrical constructions encouraging reflection on temporality and eternity in the context of the historical museum. All of which raises significant questions about the significance of the Museum of French Monuments for museum practice today. At the book's end, Stara asserts the Museum's value "as a viable proposal addressed to cultural practices for rethinking the role of the past in the present" (p. 160). But what are its lessons? Does an embrace of contradiction and ambiguity in historical representation justify (or even necessitate) the inclusion of fabrications and pastiches? Is the project of the museum, predicated as it is on the separation of objects from their historical setting and meanings, and the imposition of new ones, really as unproblematic or inevitable as Stara asserts?

In the final sections of the book, Stara consider the arguments of two of the Museum's opponents, Quatremère de Quincy and the sculptor Louis-Pierre Deseine: both were concerned with the integrity of works of art in their traditional and ritual contexts, which they saw as providing legibility of meaning. The conflict between Lenoir and Quatremère is a familiar one within museum history, that with Deseine less so, and Stara does a good job here of unfolding the various positions at stake—only, as noted above, to ultimately undermine this close reading in favor of a valorizing perspective that reduces the real force of their dissenting positions. As Stara demonstrates, Lenoir and Quatremère met on a number of issues: public edification, the primacy of sentiment and imagination in aesthetic experience, the historical

restoration of works of art, and others. It does not, however, follow that Lenoir was providing answers in advance to Quatremère's criticisms, or that Quatremère's objections were thus misguided or personally motivated misreadings. In reality, it is more likely that their shared concerns were what lent the academician's criticisms their particular direction and force—that Quatremère opposed the museum not out of a misreading of its aims, but out of a recognition of the distance between Lenoir's approach and his own. To take just one example cited by Stara, Quatremère's argument concerning historical restorations, which recognized their utility but championed archaeological accuracy and cautioned against making false additions does *not* make these views “not so different from Lenoir's work, including [his] fabriques” (p. 151), but rather precisely helps to explain his opposition to these.

Lenoir and Quatremère both sought an “order” for objects that would grant them legibility in a unified context; while Quatremère sought this order in the return of appropriated artworks and fragments to their original settings, Stara suggests that this was already an “essentially retroactive” view *resulting* from the emergence of the museum—these artifacts only being made visible as such, as bearers of their meaning, through the act of detachment and recontextualization. This is an intriguing reading, and one that bears further investigation; as presented here, however, it serves to assert what Stara terms “the inevitability of the museum,” and to paint Quatremère as an antiquated figure naïvely seeking to recapture a nostalgic unity of culture “through a simple reversal of the alienating process” (p. 155). It is true, of course, as Stara writes, that it would have been much more difficult “to read the royal tombs as manifestations of the progress and decline of French art, and consequently of the endurance of the French nation” (p. 9), if they had remained in place at Saint-Denis. But this does not in itself justify their removal, or their new existence at the Museum. Lenoir's Museum of French Monuments may have initiated many concerns of the modern museum, but it did not answer all the questions that surrounded it during its life, nor those whose specter it continues to raise today, as governments and historical museums alike struggle with issues of national patrimony, cultural value, collection and repatriation, and the persistent problem of representing the past in the present.

## NOTES

[1] In works by Françoise Choay, Lynn Hunt, Annie Jourdan, James A. Leith, Pierre Nora, Mona Ozouf, Rolf Reichardt, Daniel Roche, Werner Szambien, Richard Taws, and many others.

[2] For instance, in the annual Salon *livrets*, which preceded Lenoir's catalogues, or his contemporary Charles-Paul Landon's illustrated catalogues of works exhibited in the Louvre and the annual Salons, published from 1801 as the *Annales du Musée et de l'école moderne des beaux-arts*.

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ISSN 1553-9172