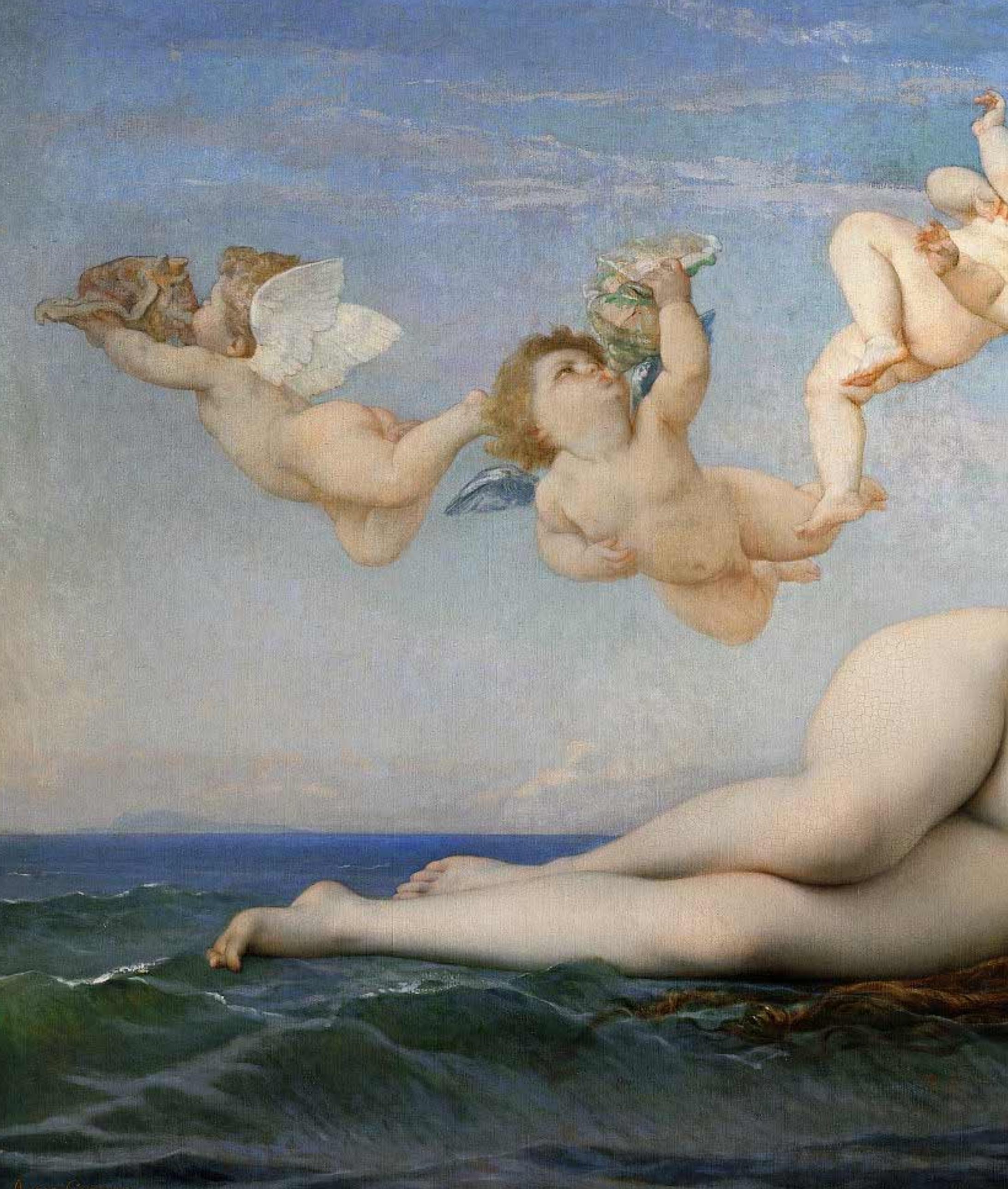


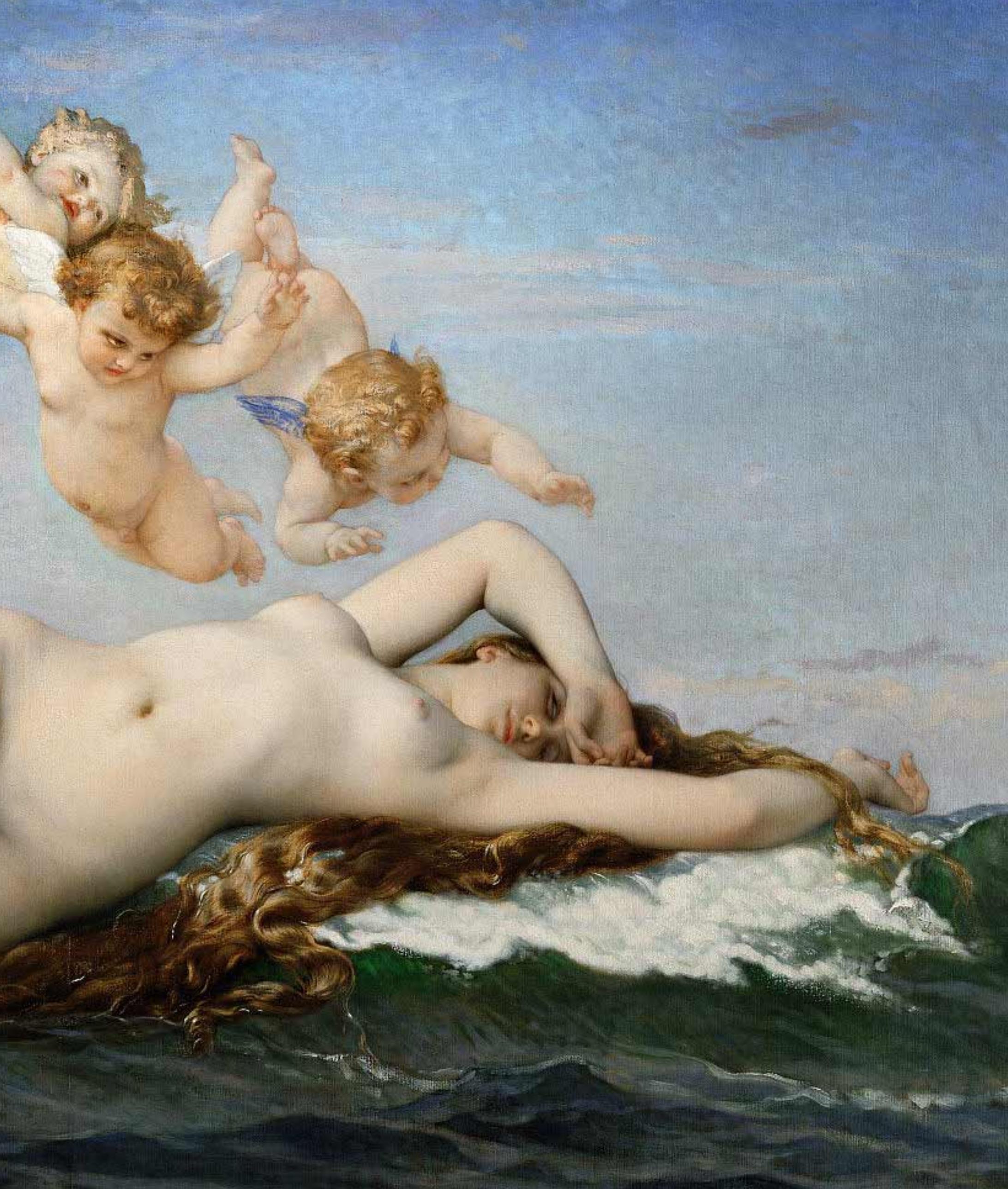


J. L. FORAIN. INGRES. P. 1814. ROM.

















NORBERT
WOLF

THE
Art
OF THE
Salon

THE TRIUMPH OF
19TH-CENTURY PAINTING



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Notes FOR THE Reader



Acknowledgements



The vast number of pictures that can be included under the heading of salon painting cannot be counted; in France alone the number, conservatively estimated, reached roughly 100,000 in the nineteenth century. The present book can thus not attempt to offer a complete survey. It can only provide a representative cross-section; one that makes no bones about the weaknesses of salon painting but does not force this art back again into the Procrustean bed of a developmental history constructed by the avant-garde.

In order to keep the literature within reasonable bounds I have limited myself to titles that are available to a non-specialist audience. I have also sought to restrict the footnotes by citing only quotations or particularly important ideas offered by the literature. In the foot-

notes I have generally refrained from duplicating publications listed in the bibliography that unmistakably deal with individual artists, specific topics, and so on. Examples of pictures that are brought in merely as illustrations without being discussed further were not given their own footnotes; the titles concerned can be easily found in the bibliography. The birth-and-death dates of all the persons discussed in detail are noted in the index.

It is due to the dedication of many staff members at the publishing house that it has been possible to present this book in such an ambitious form. I would like express my gratitude in particular to Stefanie Penck, Claudia Stäuble, and especially Eckhard Hollmann: It was he who developed this project and inspired me to examine nineteenth-century painting from this thematic aspect.

♠
I
THE
Revival
OF
Interest
♣

Why has there been a resurgence of interest in salon painting, even in those examples that could be declared kitschy? It is a well-known fact that Salvador Dalí joined the ranks of its emulators in the 1960s. In 1967 he wrote, “Whereas in our age an astounding number of books on contemporary art have been published, there are practically none at all devoted to the heroic painters with the lovely name of ‘pompiers.’”¹

Dalí’s monumental canvas *The Battle of Tetuán* makes explicit reference to Mariano Fortuny y Marsal. This took place at a time when many critics observed that the Spanish artist had sold himself to the conditions of the (especially American) market (just as the salon painters of the nineteenth century had done with respect to their markets). Others, in contrast, elevated him to the status of “inventor” of Postmodernism, which would commence approximately ten years later. The latter prompted its adherents to draw upon historical styles or the works of predecessors and to update them in a new guise: “The post-modern artist,” in the words of Boris Groys, “inquires into the transformations that artistic styles of the past have undergone in the profane reality of modern mass society and the media—and aestheticizes these transformations.”²

For this reason Postmodernism also indulges in a playful and ironic contact with kitsch, with far-reaching consequences: “... the image of kitsch as an enemy has largely served its time. It may not be fit for the salon, but kitsch has at least become tolerable. The fact that attitudes towards kitsch have relaxed considerably, that new avenues are now open, and that once taboo objects now transgress the boundaries of the milieu in which they were

primarily found in the past must be seen against the background of more comprehensive social change: the tendency to ‘deverticalize’ the social-cultural space.”³ Jeff Koons is among those who greatly advanced this verticalization. If one places Koon’s porcelain figure *Amore* (fig. 4) beside Jean-Léon Gérôme’s sculpture *Corinth* (fig. 3), one could interpret the former as “kitschily” radicalized “salon art.”⁴

On the assumption that this observation is correct, this fact does not release us from the more far-reaching question of why the present view of salon painting converges upon a postmodern perspective at all, which it does not do with earlier artistic currents.

Does it have to do with the fact that aesthetic pluralism has already long since superseded monolithic aesthetic normativity? “The boundaries become penetrable, possibilities arise for combining and integrating aesthetic forms that had previously been separated into legitimate and illegitimate culture and that had created fine distinctions [cf. Pierre Bourdieu]. Signs such as kitsch, connected since the waning nineteenth century with the petite bourgeoisie, are no longer clear indications of a particular social status and must accordingly be evaluated anew in each specific context.”⁵

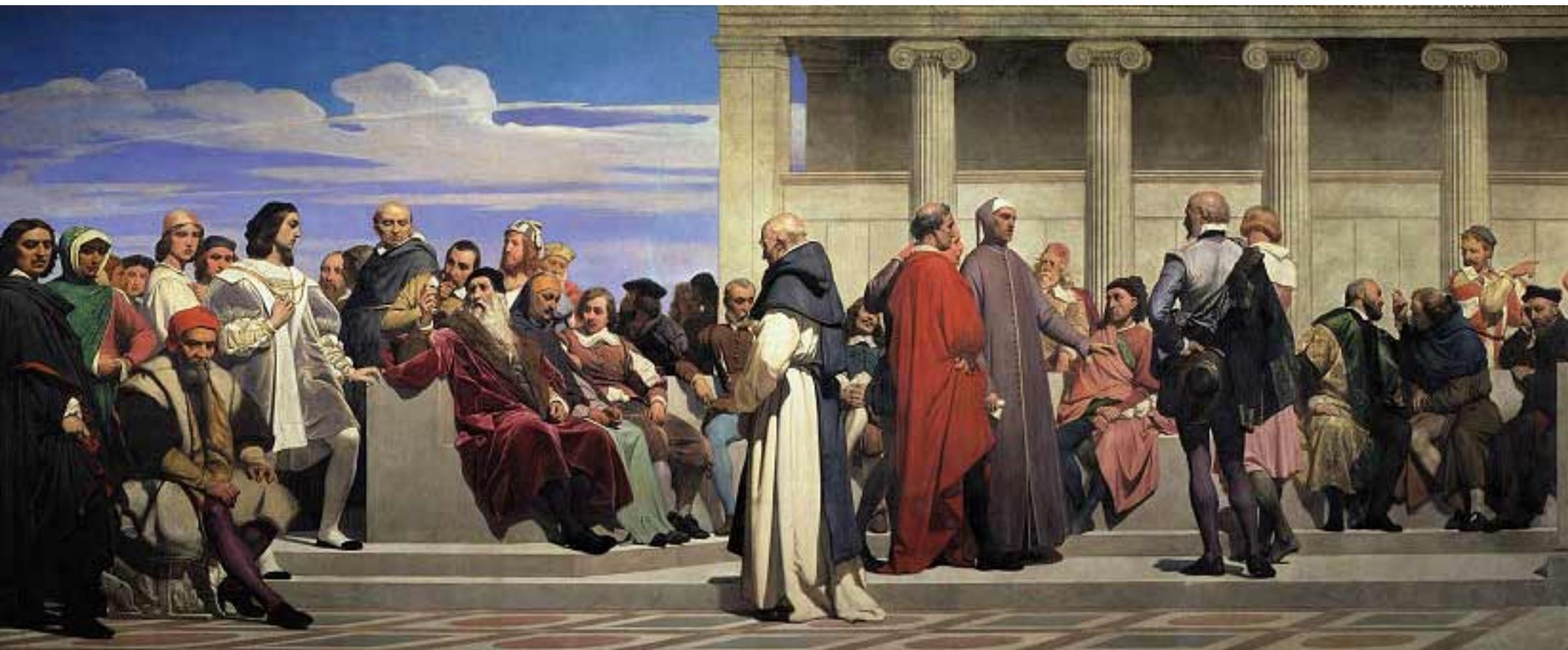


Fig. 1
 PAUL DELAROCHE
 Hémicycle
 Left part, 1837–1841
 Oil and encaustic, height 390 cm
 Paris, *École des Beaux-Arts*

Or is it rather a contemporary symptom of fatigue? To the effect that the present-day art public, tired of constant self-reflection, is grateful for an art that “narrates,” that offers a guarantee of recognizable iconography? Is this merely superficial philistinism? It is no longer clear how to answer this. Is it a deficiency of interpretation when the comprehension of salon painting attempts to resuscitate the “beautiful”? Even a radical nineteenth-century champion of modernity such as Charles Baudelaire was not able to free himself completely from that classicistic aesthetic; in his Salon review of 1846 he conceived of beauty as a compromise between transitory and—as always—absolute values.⁶ Initially it was the avant-garde of the early twentieth century that accused this conception of art of dishonesty in general and demanded that art in an ugly world should not be beautiful. Beauty was no more than a tactic of diversion from raw social reality. Is the postmodern acceptance of kitsch not, as Konrad Paul Liessmann claims, an ironic rehabilitation of sublime beauty in art?⁷

Or, another possibility to consider: Can the present-day acceptance of salon painting be attributed to a process of cultural recycling? Innovation, according to Groys, is not a matter of *creatio ex nihilo*, but rather a transvaluation of values—because the value of a modern cultural work always arises through its relationship to other works and not through its dependence upon facts and circumstances external to the culture (whether religious or metaphysical, or philosophical in any sense). “Novelty” is not of value to a culture in and of itself, for then it would be simply

a swiftly vanishing and arbitrary gimmick. Rather, what is new is accorded value by being compared with what is old, preserved in historical memory. These reevaluations can go in two directions. First, something formerly seen as valuable can be devalued because it has become redundant; its message has grown fainter. Or, secondly, something formerly judged as trivial, primitive, or vulgar can come to be seen as a cultural asset and thus as an exhibit worthy of a museum. When museums decide today to integrate salon painting as a new stimulus into the ongoing discussion about art, to display it, to retrieve it from the depository, they are simultaneously prompting a discussion about the social conditions of cultural appreciation and/or depreciation, a discussion induced by the problem of constant loss of novelty, which every artistic trend is subject to once it begins to be socially tolerated.

In 1915 a culture-critical study published in the United States asserted that the modernity of American culture consisted in negating the aesthetic dictates of “highbrow” and “lowbrow” and positioning itself in an intermediary realm “in which the bloodlessness of a high culture and avant-garde art immunized by sacralization has been vanquished in the same way as mass culture’s tendencies towards commercial standardization.” Winfried Fluck, whom I quote here, transfers this thought to the landscape painting of the Hudson River School (see fig. 214). That which Europeans frequently criticize in it, according to him, should instead be turned around into its opposite, “For the



Fig. 2
PAUL DELAROCHE
Hémicycle
Right part, 1837–1841
Oil and encaustic, height 390 cm
Paris, École des Beaux-Arts



Fig. 3
JEAN-LÉON GÉRÔME
Corinth, 1904
Polychromed marble, gilded bronze,
enamel, semi-precious stones, etc.,
height 72.4 cm
Beverly Hills, J. Nicholson Collection



Fig. 4
JEFF KOONS
Amore, 1988
Porcelain, 80 × 50 × 50 cm
Munich, Museum Brandhorst



Fig. 5
ALEXANDER WAGNER
Chariot Race in the Circus
Maximus, c. 1898
Oil on canvas, 138.3 × 347 cm
Manchester, City Art Galleries

Hudson River School that we perceive today is seen after Hyper-realism and Pop art; in its leveling out of the concepts of ‘high’ and ‘low’, the Hudson River School showed the way for removing the suspicion of kitsch from gaudy coloration or the dramatic scene—and thus also the embarrassed anxiety about the work’s ostensible tastelessness. In the associated transvaluation, the criteria and hierarchies have changed and, in their decidedly ‘anti-modernistic appearance’ the images of the Hudson River School can seem unexpectedly new.⁹ And with this we have arrived at an aspect of salon painting that is most responsible for its presence in the current dialogues about art and images: its affinity to modern media.

Into the late nineteenth century American landscape painters preferred a horizontal format (cf. fig. 212) seen from an extremely high vantage point: a composition that awakened the impression of a vast expanse, a panorama. This kind of expansion of the picture field will be mentioned frequently in the following chapters, and not only with regard to the paintings of the Hudson River School but in the large-format images of established painting in general; one need only think of the spectacular wide-format images of someone like John Martin (see fig. 96). A further, particularly striking example that can be cited here is a wall painting of 1837–41 by Paul Delaroche, which created a furor: In *Hémicycle* (figs. 1, 2) he uses historical and allegorical figures placed against an antique portico and a landscape background to stage the history of art in nothing less than a “wide-angle effect.”¹⁰ The term ‘panorama’ was first coined for a wide-angled landscape around 1790, and was used in a figurative sense as well for any form of intellectual overview; in terms of



Fig. 6
Scene from the Chariot Race in
the Film “Ben Hur”

medium, it was also taken to refer to the new man-made installations. Constructed panoramas¹¹ are round paintings of generally massive dimensions. Around 1830 the prevailing rule of thumb for these transportable canvases, which traveled from site to site, was a height of fourteen meters and a “spread” of roughly 120 meters. The inventor of the panorama, the Irish painter Robert Barker, succeeded in 1789 in developing a process for optically distorting the individual topographical views; this optical distortion was a prerequisite for the scenes—which were transferred and mounted together upon the interior wall of a cylinder—to appear perspectively correct to the viewer standing in the center. People worked steadily at improving the illusion. In 1838 in Paris—the capital of art and of panoramas—Jakob Ignaz Hittorf erected a massive rotunda in which the space between the central visitors’ platform and the paintings was bridged with sculptural terrain forms below and covered with a giant canopy above. For the London world exposition of 1851 the “Great Globe” was made, which displayed the surface of the earth on the interior of a great spherical construction, an idea that would be brought to perfection at the Paris world exposition in 1900.

Panoramas were attractions for a big-city public, which purchased at least 100 million admission tickets worldwide in the period from 1870 to 1900. Stephan Oettermann speaks of an underlying “democratization of the gaze.” Panoramas speculated upon the appetite of the masses for visual sensation. But interest in them also waned just as quickly as they had originally caused a stir. This was to be counteracted by constantly replacing the circular images and their sequences of scenes. Another possibility was offered by the “moving panorama,” which was intensified to the



Fig. 7
 EDOUARD CASTRES ET AL.
 The Bourbaki Panorama, 1881
 Oil on canvas, 980 × 11,500 cm
 Reduced in size in the 20th century
 Lucerne, Bourbaki-Panorama

point of cinematic spectacle: In the first third of the nineteenth century the American John Banvard had a landscape along the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers on a canvas supposedly three miles long pass by in front of viewers by being rolled between two rollers. This was more or less the birth of the idea of cinema.

The genre of the panorama presented a challenge to the art of painting and more than a few of the painters belonging to the “establishment” were also active in this field. To cite only two examples: First, in 1881 Edouard Castres and collaborators painted the *Bourbaki Panorama* (fig. 7) with an episode from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, namely the crossing of the defeated army of General Bourbaki into neutral Switzerland; and, secondly, a stage version of Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days* was performed 1,550 times between 1874 and 1898. A team of 1,800 people worked on the spectacle and brought onto stage moveable panoramas of Suez and India, balloons, fireworks, a train with a steam whistle, a steamship, 800 costumes, and 80 mechanical snakes.¹²

The panorama, in the form of *vedute*, depictions of battles, illustrations from the Bible, and views of the Orient, was booming business, and comprised both affordable mass entertainment and cultural and educational presumptions. “Salon” paintings, which were not integrated into panorama rotundas, but whose system largely followed the principle of the panoramic gaze, offered the viewer an abundance of visual data, which could be absorbed only in prolonged looking. In this sense they anticipated certain principles of the feature film to come. “Precisely those paintings that are not considered Modern today, those that did not predominantly engage in aesthetic experimentation with the forms of our visual

perception...served in their own way as projection surfaces for the public...They thus rendered exactly the same assistance in dealing with dreams, hopes, fears, desires, and longings that is provided by films today. It is not accidental that the great film production centers have been referred to as dream factories.”¹³

The way in which panoramas and the paintings oriented along their lines were on a trajectory towards the screening of films, is made abundantly clear through a comparison of Alexander Wagner’s *Chariot Race in the Circus Maximus* (fig. 5) and the costume film *Ben Hur* (fig. 6) of 1959. Gérôme’s work offers numerous further instances.¹⁴ And it is also known that the film star Gloria Swanson admired the “spectacle” pictures of Gabriel von Max’ (see fig. 109) and arranged for their reenactment in early Hollywood films.¹⁵

I quote Eberhard Roters on the question of media: “To the same extent that film molted into an art form, painting became liberated from the fabrication of dreams, relieved of it by film. Only once it was freed from this burden...did the chance arise for painting to become occupied predominantly with itself and its own means as an instrument of perceptual psychology, of epistemology, and finally also an instrument for the transcending of perception, in short with the structures of its own reality. Only in this way was the path to modernism opened up to it. But this also means that the visual arts of the twentieth century paid the price for the autarchy of their scope with the loss of a great deal of their popular character.”¹⁶ Previously it had been only salon painting that possessed the complete and utter monopoly on the visibly spectacular appearance—as well as the ability to create it—and with its help, conquered mass culture, for better or for worse.