

**ON PAINTING IN CLASSICIST ART THEORY**  
**Theoretical attitudes to practice**  
**in the second half of the eighteenth century**

**SUMMARY**

The character of the manual execution and material form of the art object were ascribed little value in the classicist theory of art. The practical act of painting was associated with the handicraft tradition, and the concomitant material was regarded in many respects as a kind of tool in the service of technical execution. In light of this, the classicist art theorists can be said to have shown little interest in the distinctive characteristics of the medium as such. The thrust of their theory was towards the literary and the philosophical; art was supposed to idealize its subjects. For this reason great value was ascribed to the artists' mental creativity and the philosophical treatment of their subjects, as well as to the experience of these aspects on the part of the observer. Studies and historical surveys have paid particular attention to this emphasis on the mental and ideal dimension.

Although classicist theory gave great prominence to the mental and idealist determinants of art, it did not reflect or speculate exclusively upon these aspects. The theory also dealt with practice - with the manual and material side of creating the work of art. It cannot be denied that practice was often treated as a trivial element; sometimes, in texts concerned with the more exalted aims of art, it was ignored altogether. But even negative values can be interpreted as the adoption of a theoretical position. It has thus been my aim in this dissertation to clarify the role of practice in classicist theory. I have been reading, as it were, in the gaps left by other researchers.

Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) offered a theoretical perspective. In Foucault's view, what we call "knowing" and "knowledge" are subjected at every historical moment to regularization, for example by the applications of praxis, by classification systems or by various other conventions. These determine the conditions for inclusion within the boundaries of

knowledge and the way in which it is to be organized; they also define the relevant rules for those who wish to act within an area of knowledge. Foucault's perspective seemed to provide a suitable point of departure for the present study, since the dichotomy between the ideal and material dimensions in painting was a fundamental principle of the classicist tradition. I thus decided to take this dichotomy as a kind of leading theme, a given inflectional pattern that all the actors within the theory were compelled to stick to.

I examine classicist art theory during a period when its fundamental epistemological material was being processed, organized and systematized with more conscious intent than before, namely during the second half of the eighteenth century. It has not always been recognized that during this period the ambition of Enlightenment thinkers to deepen the stock of knowledge, to register and communicate it, coincided with the revitalization of classical theory in the more severe climate of Neo-Classicism. The belief that it is possible to elucidate art in words and to formulate valid principles for it, can be seen as evidence of the assumption, common to both the Enlightenment and to classicist art theory, that the arts represented one among many areas of knowledge. A concrete manifestation of this was the publication of a number of works on the arts in reference books and encyclopaedias - in other words in what were then the most characteristic vehicles for organized knowledge. Two important examples of such works have been studied in some detail in the dissertation, namely Johann Georg Sulzer's *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste* (1771-1774), and the particular parts devoted to the arts in the *Encyclopédie Méthodique* which appeared in 1778 and 1791, edited by Claude-Henri Watelet and Pierre-Charles Levesque.

Another contribution to art theory seems to demonstrate a similar interest in art-theoretical knowledge and to reflect a contemporary demand for it. This was Anton Raphael Mengs' collected works, published after the death of the author in 1779. During his lifetime Mengs' influence on art theoretical thinking was limited to the German-speaking world, but within that world he was regarded as an authority. After his death, however, translations into

several languages and the publication of many editions of his collected works testify to a demand for his texts all over Europe. The publication and translations of Joshua Reynolds' academic *Discourses* can be similarly regarded as an expression of a willingness and a need to explore and communicate art-theoretical knowledge.

The first chapter of the dissertation is devoted to the way the dichotomy in painting, as discussed above, is treated in the four chosen texts. At this point one of the most important findings of the study emerged: that the ideal and the material were regarded not only as essentially different in kind, but that the relation between them was also of central importance in the theory. According to this view the material element was not simply regarded as the opposite of the ideal dimension; it was also a question of an interaction.

It was in the nobler mental dimension that the higher aims of art were conceived and shaped, thereby marking an essential distance between this dimension on the one hand and the practical and material on the other, and endowing the mental dimension with its greater value. It was important to the arttheorist to identify and distinguish the product of the mind from the product of the hand. But it was also important to recognize that they both contributed to creating the aesthetic effect. According to the classicist theory, paintings were to be seen as the result of an interaction between soul and body, between internal and external forces in the processes of creation and perception. The work itself was similarly divided into two aspects: the handling of the material element was seen as a theatrical structuring, *literally producing or performing* its subject. Thus the picture was regarded as a combination of two effective parts: a carefully formed idea was realized, or produced, through the mediation of a material structure. Practice was thus seen as a tool of thought, and as such could be ascribed a complementary value. Consequently it was also possible, *without contravening* the established ranking of the ideal and the material, to value and appreciate the material aspect for the important function it fulfilled in the production of the work as a whole. Thus in classicist art theory it was possible to

view the role and importance of practice in more than one perspective.

Recognition of this multifaceted approach to practice casts an interesting light on the high value assigned to the sketch in the classicist tradition.

The spontaneity of the sketch was generally appreciated, and the classicists sometimes complained about the way its vitality could be destroyed in the process of refinement and execution. This may appear inconsistent, as it seems to be indicating the simultaneous presence of contrasting ideals: the value of spontaneous creativity is acknowledged, and yet aesthetic ideals are being advocated that in application would eradicate the individual or distinctive quality in favour of a conventional and polished exterior. Considering that the classicists emphasized the difference in kind as well as in function between the two elements in the art of painting, however, and that they could alternate between a hierarchical and a complementary value perspective, it becomes clear why the good qualities of the sketch could not represent the noblest aims of art. The actual crafting of the art object, its practical execution, also played an important part: classicist theory saw the work of art as more than just a manifestation of individual creativity: giving form to an idea called for a consummate communicative representation in a finished painting. The visibility and animation bestowed in the act of execution was important to the classicist theorists.

The texts studied here not only describe fundamental theoretical principles, they also refer to various ways of painting which were held up as models or warning examples. The dichotomy in the art of painting can be seen as a kind of theoretical hub, logically linking together such categorizations of styles, genres, schools and individual artists' works. The second chapter looks at some of these categorizations on the basis of a single text, namely the *15 Discourses* of Joshua Reynolds.

Reynolds describes straightforward imitative representation as handicraft pure and simple and, in idealist terms, as an underdeveloped or immature type of painting. In the *Discourses* this classification includes Dutch seventeenth-century painting,

painting in the "lower" genres, and works produced during the first stages of an artistic apprenticeship or at the historical dawn of the art of painting. The first basic stage is also said to correspond to a natural starting-point in the evolution of taste. Any observer who is ignorant of the loftier aims of art, says Reynolds, expects to find a wealth of detail in pictures to titillate his senses. Representations of this type thus belong to a kind of primitive level in terms of taste, artistry and history. Reynolds, who believed in the idealist aims promulgated by classicist art theory, and who claimed that art should be more than simple depiction, supported his thesis by drawing a comparison with a civilized society: like a good citizen, every man as artist and observer should seek to elevate himself above this original state and to strive for refinement and a higher level of culture.

In Reynolds' view the art of Raphael and Michelangelo testifies to such an advanced state of development, just as history painting qualifies for a position at the uppermost level in the hierarchy of the genres. Here, there are no seductive effects or superficial attractions. In the organization of the subject and the treatment of light and colour, this kind of painting shows simplicity and restraint - a visual reductionism that is the perceptible result of an intellectual analysis of the subject. This refinement shows that the artist has penetrated beyond the fabric of superficial detail and transient realities and rediscovered reality not as it is, but as it could be in the fullness of its perfection. This is where the moment of genuine creation occurs. But this idiom, in all its dense restraint, is not naturally attractive; it demands an observer whose taste has developed beyond the level of mere biological disposition.

Sometimes, however, Reynolds doubts the visual power of the refined pictorial idiom. He makes this particularly clear when he shifts his perspective and admits that decorative and sensual effects in the paintwork itself can attract the attention of the beholder to the work of art. The kind of painting that Reynolds describes as ornamental - Venetian Renaissance painting, for example, or the works of Rubens or Gainsborough where colour is so important - suffers from indulgence in an exaggerated and

eye-catching technique. At the same time, though, it also possesses merits that Reynolds cannot ignore: a pleasing treatment of colour can help to soften the ascetic idiom.

The study of the *Discourses* in the dissertation thus confirmed that in Reynolds' day it was possible to alternate between different perspectives on the theoretical positioning of practical execution. In considering the differences in kind between these two sides to the art of painting, Reynolds insists that the material must always be subordinate to the ideal. The ultimate requirement is that the practical aspect of painting should draw no attention to itself, should restrain its expressive powers and subordinate itself to an intellectual and idealizing analysis. It should communicate the ideal message without imposing itself on the eye of the beholder. But Reynolds also considers functional aspects, and recognizes that too visually reduced and sophisticated a representation can alienate the observers, since its mode of visual expression is remote from any untrained or natural taste. When the overall effect of the work is considered in this context, i.e. in confrontation with an observer whose attention it has to attract, then the view of the ideal and material as complementary aspects acquires greater validity. There is nothing contradictory about this. The fundamental assumption is that the two sides to the art of painting are essentially different in kind, and that the aesthetic effect of the work of art is the result of an act of functional collaboration between them. The difference lies in the way the material dimension is believed to communicate the ideational content - something which can be achieved by an attractive or a restrained mode of expression. But the aesthetic logic remains the same: the "front" of the painting is seen as a kind of performance or production of an ideational content sustained or borne up by the material structure.

An important observation to emerge from the studies in the two first chapters thus concerns the special position of the practical side of the artist's work in providing a mediatory construction - a position that allowed for the adoption of different theoretical perspectives. The hierarchical ordering of the constituent parts in the art of painting was never challenged, but it was often

accompanied by a stated acknowledgement of the important and complementary merits that the two parts possessed. The idea of collaboration between them was just as axiomatic as the assumption that, by their very nature, they represented essentially different values.

In the three following chapters these manifestations of a certain flexibility are examined in greater depth. Chapter 3 is devoted to the earlier theoretical tradition. I seek to show that such deviations from the classical rules as appear there, or any refinements in these rules, need not be regarded as chance exceptions or a temporary suspension of the classical norm as Ernst Gombrich suggests (*Norm and Form* 1966); rather, they represent a flexibility permitted within frames that remain intact. As far back as the earliest theoretical texts we find the stated recognition that painting of a kind that does not live up to the highest aims of art is not for that reason necessarily "poor", and that it may possess valuable qualities of another sort. Vasari's generous praise of Titian and Dürer is an example of this. Le Brun's description of Poussin's artistry as a merging of the good qualities of other masters - Raphael's drawing, Titian's palette and Veronese's composition - show that even a strict advocate of the classical ideals need not define perfection as the unadulterated affirmation of an expressive mode based on line and the imitation of Antiquity. In the same way the different characteristics of the national schools are discussed in terms of their complementary merits as well as their hierarchical order. Without in any way challenging the prominent position of the Roman school, theorists such as Agucchi, Dufresnoy and Bellori define the greatness of Annibale Carracci as a *combination* of the good qualities of the various Italian schools. Roger de Piles is yet more even-handed in describing the different schools, which he presents as the result of natural variations in taste. He points out the weaknesses as well as the qualities of the Italian, Flemish and German schools. Again he does not question the greater value of the Roman school; but he does not single it out as an impeccable model either. This is an approach reflected in Reynolds' *Discourses*. What is really being said is that the classical compass

allowed for many positions beyond the simple upholding of orthodox principles and norms. There is one particular structure that perhaps provides the best illustration of this combination between a fairly strict normative theory and a relative openness to diverging values, namely what is generally referred to as the hierarchy of the genres. Some scholars have assumed that the genre hierarchy was a strict ranking order. However, as Richard Wrigley points out (*The Origins of French Art Criticism* 1993), it can be more fruitful to think of it as an interpretive structure that was something more than just a hierarchy: it also defined relative measures of perfection for every type of painting included in its rankings. The hierarchy thus allowed painting in the lower genres to be singled out for praise on the grounds that they fulfilled important quality requirements in their own class. But this still did not mean that the measure of highest perfection was being called in question. The classicist ideals represented by history painting, the highest genre of them all, remained intact.

Chapter 4 looks at texts that exploited the freedom allowed within the theoretical system, and that testified to a particular interest in practice. The chapter opens with a discussion of Roger de Piles' last text, *Cours de peinture par principes* (1708). De Piles, perhaps his century's most important theorist of painting, pays detailed attention to the visual effects of the art of painting. These, he claims, are the most important element in the work of art, since the observer's encounter with colour and form will be crucial to the resulting experience. Unlike other classicist theorists, who do not deny the important function of the painting medium, but who rarely take any interest in it since their minds are firmly fixed on the ideal and mental values, de Piles takes this functional aspect as the starting-point for his theoretical approach. Thomas Puttfarcken (*Roger de Piles' Theory of Art* 1985) sees de Piles' theory on the visual effects of painting as a weakening of the established hierarchy between mind and hand. I prefer to claim that this hierarchy remains basically unaffected. What de Piles has done is to shift the boundaries between the two components. He sees the planning of the picture's visual organization as part of the overall artistic invention. The visual



effect, even though it is realized by or through the practical execution, has its origins in the work of the mind. Thus de Piles includes within the governance of the soul effects that others assign to the material dimension, but the essential distinction in kind and the hierarchical ranking between the two sides of the art of painting remain unimpaired. Precious qualities are still validated by association with the world of the mind, while the material execution is seen as its instrument.

Christian Ludwig von Hagedorn invokes a similar argument in *Betrachtungen über die Mahlerey* (1762), where he claims that the shaping of the idea and the material should be seen as inseparable parts of one and the same process. They interact in the work of invention and execution, and no processing of one or the other can occur without taking account of the other component's effect. However, despite this strong emphasis on mutuality, Hagedorn's line of argument does not suggest relinquishing the difference in kind between the components or their positions in the hierarchy. It is no more a question here than it was in the case of de Piles (whose influence on Hagedorn was considerable), of raising the value of the manual execution or of revising its established definition. Here, too, it is the soul that steers. But the influence of the soul does extend far beyond the usual boundaries and in this respect Hagedorn can be said to have won a point in favour of practice. It is equally clear, however, that this extension in the hegemony of the soul has its limits. He who simply paints, doing nothing to harmonize the manual work with a nobler idea, remains no more than a humble craftsman. Thus Hagedorn maintains the hierarchy and the essential differences, and he changes things as little as de Piles did when it comes to the accepted idea of the nature of artistic creativity and of the relative position of the material-processing element.

Another interesting example of classicist flexibility within an unaltered framework is provided by Joshua Reynolds' *Discourse* on his recently deceased colleague Gainsborough in 1788. This text might perhaps appear inconsistent. Reynolds spends many appreciative words on Gainsborough's painting, but the *Discourse* closes by referring to the other artist as a warning example for

the Academy's young students of art. Those whose ambition is to create something of real value in their art must choose another way, says Reynolds. But the ambivalence in this text disappears, when we see how it reflects the same kind of logic as the hierarchy of the genres. Identifying a noble goal for art does not mean excluding the relative appreciation of lower-ranking qualities. Gainsborough receives a generous amount of attention and acknowledgement, but the encomium is conditional. The reader is reminded that the merits discussed are being evaluated according to a relative measure. Reynolds makes it quite clear that the qualities he has praised should not be confused with those constituting the supreme aim of the art of painting. Which means in turn that the words of praise must be severely tempered by appropriate words of warning. In purely rhetorical terms a noticeable break thus appears in the text, but the twist does not raise any theoretical problem as regards the logic. This practice of relativizing the value hierarchy without questioning the value scale in itself, was an established theoretical strategy particularly in the context of the genre hierarchy.

The final chapter, Chapter 5, is devoted to the theorist who expresses his own appreciation of the values attaching to practical execution more openly than any of the others studied here. I am referring to Charles Nicolas Cochin. Like many of the theorists examined above Cochin enjoyed close contact with the contemporary artistic life. He was a friend of many artists active in the lower genres, and he paid little attention to literary or philosophical ideals. What interested him instead was the expression of the individual personality in the work of art. Cochin was thus recasting one of the central themes of classicist theory by inserting personality into the place usually occupied by the intellect in mental creativity. But, in a penetrating study of Cochin (*Charles-Nicolas Cochin et l'art des lumières* 1993), Christian Michel claims that Cochin himself seems to have been unaware of the ambivalent position which he frequently adopted vis-à-vis tradition.

Michel pays particular attention to Cochin's emphasis on individuality, and observes that practice acquired greater

prominence as a result of it. At the same time, however, Michel tends to underestimate just how radical Cochin was being here, pointing out that the artists as well as the theorists of the time sometimes expressed their appreciation of manual workmanship. What Michel does *not* take into account is that while it was possible within the academic tradition to ascribe a positive value to practice *without questioning* the established rankings between mind and hand, Cochin's texts actually deviate from the accepted pattern in that they do question this powerful norm. Having said this, however, it is important to remember that Cochin never expressed any conscious intention of upsetting the classicist frames. As Michel also points out, Cochin had deep roots in the classicist tradition.

What emerges clearly from a reading of Cochin's texts is that they contain many traditional ideas, while sometimes also expressing controversial views about the importance of practice in a remarkably neutral tone. That his texts really do contain controversial elements and that his contemporaries reacted to these, is revealed in an interesting way in the *Encyclopédie Méthodique. Beaux-Arts*. Under the headword "Illusion" editor Levesque quotes from Cochin's "De l'illusion dans la Peinture", where the writer declares that manual skill is the mark of true mastery, and that the ability to draw well - which classicist theorists since Vasari had embraced as the most important medium for intellectual analysis - is not a necessary ingredient. This was a clear undermining of the classicist norm. One consequence of this position, which Cochin himself neglects to comment on, is that it challenges the authority of the Roman school. According to the classicists, Raphael's greatness was not contingent on his skill in the craft of painting: it was almost unanimously agreed that Raphael did not paint particularly well. Rather, it was the quality of his drawing and consequently his capacity for idealizing analysis, to which tribute was paid. Editor Levesque reacted to the challenge of this text. He included it in his encyclopaedia but added some comments of his own on the unorthodox views regarding the value of practice that Cochin also offered. Levesque's observations are polemical, drawing attention to what in his eyes

were the irrational implications of Cochin's conclusions: could it really be said of Raphael, just because he could not paint well, that he was not a great artist? Levesque, who represented a rigorous interpretation of the ideas of classicism, saw much more value in a elevated conception than in a skilful hand. Even so, Cochin's deviations from the traditional values were not so great as to prevent their inclusion in the encyclopaedia - together with the editor's own warning comments. Obviously Levesque did not want to deny himself this opportunity of taking up the disputed topic of "illusion".

Not even Cochin, however, relinquished the notion of practice as a tool in the service of mental creativity. He did not pay tribute to technique as such. Only when it was set in motion by an individual whose distinctive mode of expression it conveyed, did it acquire a value. Thus Cochin was not altering the position assigned to practical execution in the theory of art. Practice remained a mediatory tool.

In the broader overview with which the dissertation closes I suggest that in the second half of the eighteenth century there were signs of problems gathering around this issue. Those thinkers who gave great weight to the idealist nature of classicist theory, were beginning to ask how the art of painting could best be used as an instrument in realizing nobler aims, moral as well as aesthetic. The artistic life, as Robert Rosenblom (*Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art* 1967) has shown, was imbued with a lively enthusiasm for reform.

A common denominator in these contexts and among actors who in other ways were essentially so different from one another, seems to be that they saw a problem in the artificiality which, they claimed, had begun to inform the painting art, both in the composing of subjects and in their execution. Diderot, as Michael Fried (*Absorption and Theatricality* 1980) has pointed out, criticized the mannerisms and theatrical arrangements that often beset the representation of the human figure. But, as Norman Bryson (*Word and Image* 1981) has commented, Diderot also criticized eye-catching techniques in the manual execution. In his view neither the organization of the picture nor its mediatory structure

should be allowed to attract too much attention.

Similar attitudes to this have been noted elsewhere in the dissertation. Reynolds expounding his principle that a visually restrained idiom which keeps itself invisible in the cause of mediating an elevated subject, Sulzer's encyclopaedia with its recurrent warnings about the sensual effects that threaten to corrupt the observer's perceptions, and Levesque's declaration that too exaggerated and conspicuous a technique leads to decadent art, all reflect a similar concern. The distrust in the medium which is indicated by these calls for an art both less theatrical and less concerned with its material make-up, was subsequently to become even more evident. Towards the end of the century artists such as Carstens, Blake and Flaxman turned their backs on illusionistic padding, "artistic" drapery and seductive techniques altogether. They solved the dilemma of the patently material nature of oil paints and the traditionally theatrical organization of pictures by abandoning painting, instead of trying to renew it.

Thus many attitudes and statements culled from very diverse contemporary sources do seem to have one thing in common: they appear to be questioning the idea of the art of painting as pictorial construction. Confidence in the medium as a communicative instrument had been shaken. Some critics called for the reform of existing models and imposed new and stricter requirements on the art of representation. They suggested toning down not only the content but also the manual execution of the pictorial gestures. Others seem to be more pessimistic about the possibilities of oil painting altogether. It is interesting to note that even those who relinquished the ideas and idiom of Classicism, were not unaffected by these problems. Franz Pforr, the German romantic painter, reflects the same anxiety, namely that too much "artistry" in the technique and staging of the subject can obstruct the beholder's perception of the message that the picture has to convey. Pforr sees a solution in the simple expressiveness of German mediaeval pictorial art, in which he discern the kind of unfeigned naturalness that could offer the art of painting a route to its own renewal.

\*

It has not been the aim of this dissertation to provide a historical account. I have restricted myself to a chosen segment of time, but this has been with a view to exploring the structures that the period displayed rather than discussing the period as such. Nonetheless, some of my conclusions do testify to the presence of certain historical phenomena and processes. It has been shown, for instance, that the Enlightenment's ambition to organize knowledge in encyclopaedic form coincided with the attempts of a revitalized classicist theory to clarify and compile its accumulated body of knowledge and to endow it with a new authority. It has also been suggested that the academic institution need not necessarily be regarded as a dogmatic and hidebound organism in the life of the arts, but that its members and its official spokesmen could give voice to discerning and sometimes even radical opinions. The way in which actors in eighteenth-century art theory perceived the nature and distinctive quality of the art of painting has also been observed, and their attitude interpreted as a conception of art as a kind of theatrical presentation. It has been suggested further that towards the end of the century there were signs of a certain distrust in this established model, which in some cases was even being challenged outright.

The structural reading of art theory adopted here has also opened some other interesting perspectives. It appears that all the studied theorists saw practical execution as a tool, as an underlying or bearing structure. It also emerged that the representation of the idea and the material structure of the work were regarded in terms not only of a relative ranking, but also of an interactive relationship. Two theoretical approaches could thus be distinguished: on the one hand an emphasis on essential differences in kind and in value between the two aspects, and on the other a recognition of the interplay between them and of their complementary value. This meant that a theorist might say quite different things about the practical dimension even within the same text, depending on the perspective adopted.

It has also been noted that within the framework of this dichotomy it was possible to shift the boundaries between the components.

Further, many texts acknowledged various kinds of painting whose qualities, according to the criteria of the times, lay in the manual skill displayed. Traditional theory did thus allow more lowly and less highly valued elements to be considered and appreciated, without risking any challenge to the established ranking order. According to this logic an openly stated appreciation of technical virtuosity, or of the "lower" genres and other types of pictorial art that fell outside the range of the classicist norm, does not necessarily have to be regarded as an incongruent exception or temporary lapse. This flexibility made it possible to observe and comment on various kinds of pictorial art without having to revise their rank in the hierarchy. In this way the flexibility that existed within the classicist theory can be said to have helped to maintain the hierarchical structure.

Translation Nancy Adler