

# SALONS' ESTABLISHMENT, DIDEROT AND CRITICISM

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CD: Good morning Fabrice Moulin. You are a specialist in the relationship between literature and arts at Paris Nanterre University. It is said that the great painters of the 18<sup>th</sup> century exhibited at the Salon, what does that mean? What are the Salons? Since when do they exist?

FM: The Salon was the ancestor of our exhibitions and museums, so to speak. At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, after Louis XIV's reign, the Royal Academy of Painting created by Colbert was concerned with promoting its image and valuing French painting, faced by the competition of Italian or Flemish art.

From 1737, on the King Building's Steward initiative, the equivalent of Minister of Culture nowadays, the Academy exhibited the paintings of its main painters regularly. It was quite official. Every artist was invited to present at least two paintings. The event was held every two years at the Louvre Palace, which wasn't a museum yet, and more precisely in the Salon Carré, hence the term of Salon. The Salon lasted several weeks. It opened its doors on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August, on Saint Louis's day, proof of the image and prestige of the monarchy.

CD: Who were those exhibitions for?

FM: Theoretically, for anybody. Access was free and a large audience was visiting the Salons. High nobility members were seen as well as educated bourgeois or artisans. Furthermore, the Salon was an ideal place of sociability, a meeting place where discussions could be held. The noisy and agitated atmosphere was undoubtedly closer to a marketplace or a fair than to our actual museum halls, where everybody knows that they have to be silent out of respect for the nearly sacred artwork. There was no such thing during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

CD: How were the paintings displayed?

FM: There again, a 21<sup>st</sup>-century visitor would be astonished if he entered the Louvre's Salon by the large stairs. There, 200 paintings were hanged on the entire wall surface, juxtaposed, affixed side by side, to gain space of course. But it was also indicative of a relationship to the painting that is quite different to the one we have now. Nowadays, we cannot expose a painting without isolating it, without considering its uniqueness, as if sacralizing it.

At the Salon, the contiguity of the art works incited comparisons. Diderot was doing so himself. Let's specify that this "upholstering", as it was called, was not randomly done. As we can see it in the drawings of Gabriel de Saint-Aubin, it respected the academic hierarchy of paintwork, which put history painting at the top, with large format, like biblical, mythological or historical artworks, then lower there was genre painting, indoor scenes, landscapes and portraits.

Salons were cultural events and therefore were enumerated and written about in critical reports. The most famous ones nowadays are Diderot's. Why did Diderot write his *Salons*?

In 1759, Diderot, who put body and soul into the *Encyclopedia*, was enlisted in this newly forbidden gigantic organization. Maybe he needed a bit of fresh air? Either way, he accepted his friend Melchior Grimm's offer. At the time, Melchior Grimm was directing a journal named "La Correspondance littéraire", containing an account of the French cultural life for foreign readers exclusively. It only had a couple of subscribers, but they were Europeans great princes and other crowned heads: Catherine of Russia, Frederick the Great, etc. Grimm, who was not in Paris that year, asked Diderot to write for him the 1759 *Salon's* reports.

Diderot's texts took the form of letters addressed to Grimm, and through him, to this very special and very select foreign readership. There, Diderot was immune to censorship and could therefore write what he wanted. He accepted and ended up writing the reports of nearly all the *Salons* until 1781. Year after year, he refined his knowledge of pictorial technique and painters' environment. He put more and more investment and enthusiasm in critical writing. His talent and inventiveness were at their peak with the 1767 *Salon*, a true masterpiece of the kind.

CD: If I understand it correctly, Diderot wrote for a public that was far away and didn't see the works. Under what conditions did he write?

FM: You are right. The exercise that Diderot was doing was very special. He was supposed to report paintings to a healthy public of collectors who could potentially become buyers. Thus, it was needed to describe the works to them. But the paintings were doubly missing. They were absent for the reader because at the time they had no photography or digitized reproduction. The description had to be precise enough and skillfully led, not to drown the reader's imagination. But the paintings were also absent for Diderot himself, who had to write his reports away from the *Salon*, once he got home. He was consequently relying on his amazing capability of remembrance and imagination. The result was seizing but the exercise was extremely demanding.

For example, he wrote in 1763: "I am in my study, where I have to picture all those paintings. This restraint is exhausting me". Essentially, I wonder if it was precisely that lack of images, physical images, and reproductions that transfigured the art criticism into a literary and creative work by forcing Diderot to deploy the strength of his imagination. One thing for sure is that without Diderot, neither Baudelaire, nor Zola, nor Claudel would have been able to write art criticism like they did.