

DIDEROT PASSES COMMENT ON VERNET

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Reading by CD and FM:

1763 exhibition.

"How I'd like to resurrect the Greek painters and alike, as much as those from Ancient Rome and New Rome and hear what they'd have to say about Vernet's work. It is nearly impossible just to talk about them, you have to see them. What immense variety of scenes and figures, what waters, what skies, what truth, what magic, what effect. If he lights a fire, it's at the point where its glare should seem to extinguish the rest of the composition. The smoke is thick, clears little by little and is lost high up in the atmosphere. If he projects objects onto the rocks, he knows how to tinge it to its greatest intensity without making it lose its natural colour or clarity. If he turns the light out, he knows how to penetrate it, see it dance, flicker at the surface. If he sends men into action, you see them act. If he puts clouds in the sky, as if they were lightly suspended there, they'd travel at the wind's discretion.

What distance between them and the sky. If he raises a fog, the light weakens and in turn vapour is tinged and coloured. The light becomes dark and vapour becomes luminous. If he gathers a storm, you hear the wind howl and the tide wail. You hear it smashing against the rocks and whitening them with their froth. The sailors cry, the sides of vessel cave in, some fall into the water, others, on the point of dying, are spread out on the shoreline.

Over here, observers raise their hands to the sky. Over there, a mother holds her son against her breast. Others put themselves in danger to save their friends or family. A husband holds his unconscious wife in his arms. A woman cries over her drowned child. The wind makes her clothes cling to her body and reveal her curves. Merchandise floats on the surface of the water and passengers are dragged off to the edge of the abyss.

It's Vernet who knows how to gather a storm, open the skies' torrent and flood the earth. It's he who also knows, when it pleased him, to dispel the storm and restore calm to the seas and serenity to the skies. Then nature, emerging from the chaos, lights everything up in a delightful way and recovers all its charm. His days are so serene, his nights so peaceful, his waters so clear.

It's he who created the silence, coolness and shadow of the forests. It's he who dared, without fear, to put the sun or moon in his skies. He stole a secret from nature. Whatever nature produces, he can imitate it. As if his compositions could never surprise us? He embraces infinite space. It's the expanse of sky under the highest point of the horizon, it's the surface of the sea, it's a multitude of men content with society. These are immense structures which he stretches as far as the eye can see."

1763 exhibition.

"The painting which is called *"Clair de lune"* is a work of art. Both night and day are everywhere. Over here, it is the star of night which both brightens and adds colour. Over there, there are burning fires. Elsewhere, these two lights are mixed. Vernet has interpreted Milton's visible and palpable darkness in colour. I won't speak to you of the manner in which he dances and plays with this ray of light on the flickering surface of the water. It is an effect which has astounded everybody."

1765 exhibition.

"Go to the countryside, turn your gaze to the heavenly canopy, observe phenomena for a little while and you'll swear that someone has cut a piece of the large, luminous canvas lit by the sun and put it on the artist's easel. Or close your hand and made a circle allowing you to see only a limited space of

the canvas, and you'll swear it's a painting by Vernet which he made on his easel and put into the sky. Out of all our painters, this one is the most imaginative. I've come to expect no less.

It is impossible to convey his compositions. You must see them. His nights are as moving as his days are beautiful. His ports are as pretty as parts of his imagination are striking. Equally marvellous, namely how his captive brush complies with the given situation, how his laid-back muse is free and left to herself. Incomprehensible, how he uses the star of day or night, natural or artificial light, to brighten his paintings. Always harmonious, vigorous and wise, such are the great poets, these rare men in whom judgement balances so perfectly with panache that they are never exaggerated or cold.

His fabrics, his structures, the clothes, the actions, the men, the animals, everything is real. Up close, they strike you. From a distance, they strike you even more.

Chardin and my friend Vernet are two great magicians. One might say Vernet starts by creating the country and that he has men, women and children in reserve, populating his canvas like one would populate a colony. Then he introduces time, sky, seasons, happiness, unhappiness, whatever pleases him.

It is Lucien's Jupiter who, tired of hearing the lamentable cries of man, gets up from the table and says: "Get a move on hail", and we soon see pared-down trees, devastated harvests and scattered straw from huts. Plague in Asia and we see front doors shut, deserted roads and fleeing humans. A volcano and the earth burn under feet, buildings fall, animals take fright and towns people flee for the countryside. A war here and nations take up arms and butcher each other. In this place, scarcity and an old labourer dies of hunger on his doorstep. Jupiter calls this ruling the world, but he is wrong. Vernet calls this creating art and he's right."