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Thomas Couture's *Romans of the Decadence* and Henry James's "The Siege of London"

"The Siege of London," 1883, a tale involved with the duties a gentleman must assume to protect his own society from an adventuress, is based on two plays by French writers whose treatment of the "intruding woman" Henry James and his heroes take issue with.¹ But there is another, less obvious, work of art central to the tale. A well-known painting which James includes but does not name, it reinforces the *donnée* of his tale through incontestable specification. That painting enters into the ninth section of the ten-part narrative through the words of a virtuous American, Mrs. Dolphin, who has married successfully and honourably into the English upper classes and who wants to keep the American adventuress, Mrs. Headway, the *arriviste* of the story, from doing the same. "I never saw anything like the people that are taken up If they think there's something bad about you they'll be sure to run after you. It's like the decadence of the Roman Empire."² Her last words summon up Thomas Couture's celebrated picture, *The Romans of the Decadence* (1847; fig.1), which at that time was the star of modern French art in the Luxembourg Museum and was later to arrive at the Louvre where it still is. Looking at Couture's painting, it is hard to realize that this picture represented the apogee of the theatrical and the painterly in art for a generation of both Europeans and Americans in love with Europe from the 1850's through the 1880's.

The orgy that it depicts was a popular topic during the forties and fifties for it allowed the spectator to moralize and to enjoy himself at the same time. Orgies were engaged in by the decadents, and moralizing was engaged in by everyone else. A huge machine like this one

satisfied both camps, those who delighted in sensual pleasures and those who used them as signs of historical decay—not only of the fall of the Roman empire but of contemporary society. Above all, it was a painting important to James himself, to his brother William, and to his group of young friends, all painters, during their Newport days. After the tremendous success of Couture's Salon machine of 1847, one of them, William Morris Hunt, went to study with the French master, and it is through the pages of James's *A Small Boy and Others*, the first volume of his autobiography, that we learn how influential the picture was for them all. Remembering his visit to the Luxembourg when he was in Europe with his family in 1855, James recalls:

Couture's *Romains de la Décadence*, recently acclaimed, at that time was the last word of the grand manner, but of the grand manner modernized, humanized, philosophized, redeemed from academic death; so that it was to this master's school that the young contemporary flutter taught its wings to fly straightest, and that I could never, in the long aftertime, face his masterpiece and all its old meanings and marvels without a rush of memories and a stir of ghosts.³

James adds, "We were in our immediate circle to know Couture himself a little toward the end of his life," that is, before 1879, a few years before "The Siege of London" was written.

As a young critic James had written of the picture in 1868 when he had noticed, in a review of Hamerton's *Contemporary French Painters*, that the painting had been omitted. James recouped the loss by praising it at the