

Albert Boime. Thomas Couture and the Eclectic Vision. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980. Pp. xxii + 683; 594 illus. \$75.00

Albert Boime's impressive volume goes a long way toward correcting the once official views of art history that so neglected Pre-Raphaelitism, Symbolism, and later developments in Realism. Like Pre-Raphaelitism, European academic and official art has benefited from recent recognitions that the long-accepted history of romantic and post-romantic painting which has dominated introductory art courses, museum purchases, and general views of art is grossly inadequate. According to this view, the dominant tradition of painting during the past two hundred years springs from French romanticism and thence flows through French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism to German Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism. Unfortunately, such a view, which certainly points to one major tradition in the visual arts, neglects the rich tradition of European and American fantasy art, just as it also neglects academic painting and realism. In fact, such a conception of art history skews the entire notion of what important painting can and could be, since it concentrates almost entirely on formal experimentation and abstraction at the expense of other sources of pleasure that have traditionally contributed to the visual arts.

In one of those admirably clear, precise statements of complex issues which characterize his book, Boime states the assumptions that underlay his endeavor. According to him, "the art community is comprised of a wide variety of talents whose different aesthetic viewpoints generate a kind of internal dialectic. This community is naturally subject to the pressures of the market place and broad social change, but the dialectic is generally perceived by those within it as self-generated and self-perpetuating. Rather than rate individuals, it is the task of the historian to create the historical network of this community and examine the external conditions which give rise to its new directions and modifications" (p. 495). Admirably carrying out his conception of the historian's role, Boime divides his book into three sections, each of which could have been published separately as an impressive volume. The five chapters of Part 1, "Eclecticism and French Society," explain how Victor Cousin's philosophy of eclecticism -- an ideology of compromise developed in response to the turmoil of early-nineteenth-century France -- permeated all French art and culture. In setting the stage for the art-historical approaches which inform the remainder of the volume, Boime provides concise summaries of difficult materials. In the next section, "Iconography and the Juste Milieu," he examines in extraordinary detail the sources, development, and meanings of