

The Art of the Salon: The Triumph of 19th-Century Painting by Norbert Wolf. Munich: Prestel, 2012. 288 pp. ISBN 978-3-7913-4626-7. \$120.00.

I feel ambivalent about reviewing a book whose author declares that “in order to keep the literature within reasonable bounds I have limited myself to titles that are available to a non-specialist audience.” Such titles limit the author’s historical references, and ill-equip him for avoiding redundancy. Furthermore, as an art historian, I am troubled by the fact that a significant number of artworks in this volume are expressly used as illustrations: “Examples of pictures that are brought in merely as illustrations without being discussed further were not given their own footnotes.” As a reviewer, I am forced to ask if a book written for the “non-specialist audience” can serve the scholarly community.

The Art of the Salon sets out to present “a representative cross-section” of academic painting of the nineteenth century, which “makes no bones about the weakness of salon painting but does not force this art back again into the Procrustean bed of developmental history constructed by the avant-garde.” But why not make bones about the perceived “weakness”? Readers should ask: Was salon painting weak? Weak in what? Was it weak in celebrating the prestige of church and state? Weak in overlooking or naturalizing economic and political injustices that monarchs and aristocrats perpetrated? Weak in extolling the supremacy of Western European civilization and its history of colonial expansion and slavery? Weak in materializing pleasure? Weak in displaying beauty and wealth reaped from industrialization and the unregulated market? Weak in supporting patriarchy and legitimating an all-consuming, self-righteous heteronormative male desire? Weak in perpetuating the oppression of women and homosexuals? Weak in its understanding of semiotic instability or weak in its acceptance of the irreconcilable split in our psyche? Even non-specialist readers must wonder what justifies a book on academic painting that begins by accepting its “weakness,” which goes undefined.

Moreover, why would we not “force” salon painting “back again” to the avant-garde narrative system of art history? Over four decades ago, in *The Past Rediscovered: French Painting, 1800-1900*, Robert Rosenblum stated:

More and more detached from the passions that used to be aroused by the championing of the origins of the modernist tradition, we can begin to relax and to reexamine the vast and unwieldy pictorial heritage of the last century.... Today, in 1969, this linear history [of ‘great isms’ and ‘great artists’] and this dramatic parable of the battle of aesthetic good and evil no longer satisfy the curious historian and adventurous spectator.

In 1971, in his book *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth*