Academics, Pompiers, Official Artists
and the Arrière-garde
Academics, Pompiers, Official Artists and the Arrière-garde: Defining Modern and Traditional in France, 1900-1960

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

NATALIE ADAMSON AND TOBY NORRIS

In his Panorama des Arts Plastiques contemporains (1960) Jean Cassou, curator of the Musée National d’Art Moderne in Paris, cautioned that “A history of modern art, which is to say the art which has unfolded from the middle of the nineteenth century until the present, does not account for the entirety of artistic production during that period.” Cassou highlights the existence of an alternative artistic field of production against which modern art defined itself, holds that this art deserves to be studied, and asserts that without such study “it seems impossible to produce an overview of modern art since 1900.” Although the paradigm of modernist art as a teleologically progressive and radical force, politically and aesthetically, has been contested on numerous occasions in recent scholarship, and significant attention has been directed to what may be labelled “reactionary modernism” in France during the first half of the twentieth century, art historians have still largely failed to respond to the challenge proposed by Cassou. The comprehensive study of traditional modes of artistic production after 1900 remains a blind spot in art history, perhaps especially so in relation to art in France, the privileged “homeland” of modernism and the avant-gardes from the mid-nineteenth century until 1940.

This book addresses the lacuna highlighted almost half a century ago by Cassou. It was spurred by questions raised by our own research and by the desire to invite other scholars to reflect upon the construction of the broad conceptual categories of progressive and reactionary, modernist and anti-modernist, in twentieth-century French art. Our intention is not to resuscitate a deterministic opposition between avant-garde and non-avant-garde art, but to override simplistic divisions through the examination of

1 “Une histoire de l’art moderne, c’est-à-dire de l’art qui se poursuit depuis le milieu du XIXe siècle jusqu’à nos jours, n’épuise pas toute la production artistique de cette époque.” “En attendant de pareils travaux, il nous paraît impossible d’établir un panorama de l’art moderne depuis 1900.” Jean Cassou, Panorama des Arts Plastiques contemporains (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 11. All translations are by the authors unless otherwise noted.
the history and significance of operating terms for traditional art like “academic,” “official,” “pompier,” and “arrière-garde.” In this introduction to the eight essays that follow, we discuss in brief some of the important features of any historical analysis of tradition and modernity with reference to the essays and to current scholarship. We then outline a history for the four terms that we have chosen to bracket under the rubric of “traditional” art, indicating when they became current, how they were originally used, and the changes in their usage that ensued over time.

As we have worked with these categories we have become aware how slippery the terms are, and to what extent the concept of “tradition” under which we have grouped them was a source of contention. For example, in chapter two of this volume Fae Brauer offers insight into the mechanisms through which academic power was exercised (and challenged) at the beginning of the century. What has become clear, however, is how vigorously the Academy’s efforts to monopolize the idea of tradition were contested by artists of widely varying persuasions who worked outside its institutional boundaries. We open with Neil McWilliam’s examination of one such artist, Emile Bernard. McWilliam traces a path from Bernard’s active engagement with the avant-garde at the end of the nineteenth century to the deliberate re-engagement with specific aspects of the European painting tradition, allied to a broadly conservative political posture, which shaped the remainder of his career. Bernard, however, maintained a resolute separation from academic practice even as he sought a return to tradition in his work. Similar artistic trajectories—although not always accompanied by a conservative political turn at the individual level—are more frequent in the years following the First World War. Indeed this phenomenon of “reactionary modernism” during the so-called rappel à l’ordre (call to order) in the early 1920s is currently the best-understood and most thoroughly researched manifestation of “traditional” attitudes in the visual arts in the period under review.

2 Jean Laude, “La crise de l’humanisme et la fin des utopies,” in Louis Roux, ed., L’art face à la crise: L’art en Occident, 1929-1939 (Saint-Etienne: CIEREC, 1979), 318-9, long ago noted the need for an opened-out history of the 1929-1939 period, where simple divisions between reactionary, traditional, modernist and avant-garde are insufficient.

3 The term “reactionary modernism” is drawn from Jeffrey Herf, Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), although Herf’s concerns are distinct from our own. For the “call to order” in France after World War I, see Christopher Green, Cubism and Its Enemies: Modern Movements and Reaction in French Art, 1916-1928 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987) and Art in France, 1900-1940 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press,
Recent research has also brought out the extent to which similar negotiations of tradition and modernity characterise literary, musical, philosophical and religious activity in both like and contrasting terms. Major studies of the literary field, such as Antoine Compagnon’s *Les Antimodernes de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes* (2005), have examined keywords like counter-revolutionary, conservative, reactionary,arrière-garde and reformist, in the effort to demonstrate how those he calls the “anti-moderns” are in fact fundamentally modern in their conception and ideology. Moreover, contends Compagnon in a statement akin to our argument, the antimoderns, and not the historical avant-gardes, constituted the dominant current of literary thought in this period.\(^4\) Other recent work on the relationship of intellectuals to the vexed politics of the Third Republic—such as that of Jane Fulcher on the interpolation of music with politics in the disputes over national identity, republican democracy, and the roles of church, army and state—further demonstrates the importance and power of the ways in which each domain of cultural production participated in the fashioning of “antimodern” and “traditional” values.\(^5\) What such studies demonstrate is that, rather than being marginal in comparison to more overtly progressive and radical innovations, “traditional” developments across the intellectual spectrum were in fact integral to the very conceptualisation of modernity.

Considerable attention has also been paid in recent scholarship to the relationship between “returns” to tradition, forms of “reactionary modernism” (especially in literature) and the rise of the far right in France, notably during the interwar years. In this volume, Mark Antliff’s essay on the Combat journal and its art criticism adds art historical nuance to the lively debate on fascist politics and culture in France. Antliff shows that the Combat group involved an initially surprising alliance of far-left and far-right political elements, but that the group expressed clear, and rather uncontroversial, preferences in the realm of art and architecture. Such detailed analysis points to the dangers of trying to map political radicalism or conservatism directly onto artistic practice, or vice versa. Aristide Maillol was one of three figures vigorously promoted by the Combat group, and to contemporary eyes Maillol’s profoundly classical-looking sculptures might appear congruent with the group’s calls for a new political approach drawing on classical principles. In the seventh chapter, however, Penelope Curtis sets out to understand what was modern about Maillol, whose status as the favoured sculptor of modernist architects from Mies van der Rohe to Philip Johnson makes him arguably the key modern sculptor of the middle of the twentieth century. Curtis also examines the process by which Auguste Rodin has supplanted Maillol as the central figure in histories of modern sculpture written since the early 1960s.

Like Antliff, Keith Holz (chapter four) is interested in the complex relationship between political and artistic activity. His investigation of German artists who participated in the Paris branch of the pan-European organization known as the Kulturbund between the two world wars examines how a politically conservative organisation was able to accommodate and even promote the work of artists of varying degrees of

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stylistic progressiveness. In chapter three Kate Kangaslahti also focuses on foreign-born artists who made their careers in Paris. Her analysis of the origins and usage of the term “École de Paris” challenges the current understanding that the term was coined as a way of excluding or marginalising non-French artists; instead, Kangaslahti argues that it served to integrate the work of leading artists from abroad into a modern French tradition that was itself in the process of being constructed.

Indeed, any analysis of the role that tradition played in French cultural and political life in the first half of the twentieth century must contend with the disputes that proliferated over the identity of the “French tradition.” Examining the five hundred years of French painting on show at the 1937 Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la vie moderne in Paris, Louis Gillet may have been moved to observe that “the continuity strikes the eye: not a hole, not a gap,” but in practice the preceding decades had been a fertile period for competing claims about the cultural origins of French identity. During the war and into the 1920s, the “call to order” argument proposed that France had only ever been, and would continue to be, a classical culture, irrefutably Latin in origin. Another strand of tradition-making, which endured through the war years and into the late 1940s, can be found in the surge of a “nationalist primitivism” which glorified the French medieval age and ancient Celtic culture. Both “traditions” were also called upon to sustain a plethora of competing formulations of a modern French tradition of art making. If we accept Eric Hobsbawm’s assertion that tradition “automatically implies continuity with the past,” then we must note that French artists and intellectuals in our period were unable to agree whose past was at stake, and what sort of continuity was desirable. The existence of a substantial middle ground of artists who worked with one eye toward some form of tradition—academic or otherwise—and the other toward recent innovations in artistic practice further complicated the situation. In chapter five, Toby Norris investigates this middle ground, arguing that it constituted a “juste milieu,” treading a careful path between overt modernism and

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9 See above, n. 3.
excessive conservatism, and often garnering significant state support in the process.

For all the competing versions of tradition on offer, the slow and piecemeal consolidation of a modernist French tradition, shifting away from naturalistic realism, is nonetheless one of the most notable features of the artistic landscape in France in the first decades of the twentieth century. This modern tradition, however, was largely suppressed in 1940 with the defeat of France, the Occupation, and what Charles Maurras—the royalist, anti-democratic editor of *Action française*—called the “divine surprise” of Maréchal Pétain’s Vichy regime.12 As historians such as Christian Faure and Laurence Bertrand Dorléac have described, Pétain’s “National Revolution” sparked a resurgent, popularist conservatism in the arts and the resuscitation of a “grand discourse” of tradition. This new tradition was founded on a claim to universal validity in the representation of the real (in the genres of landscape, portrait, nude and still-life), on the continuity of the fine arts administration and its training for artists, and on the putative fealty of artists to a pure, indigenous French identity.13 Pro-Vichy and pro-Nazi art critics, however, did not necessarily support the version of tradition embodied by the Academy and the École de Beaux-Arts. At the same time, the Vichy notion of tradition was contested by modernist artists such as Jean Bazaine (a protagonist in chapter eight), who saw themselves as fighting for the survival and renovation of a modern tradition, completely distinct both from academic practice and from the state-sponsored naturalistic style.

The study of art and artists in France during the war years confirms that tradition in this period, as before, must be conceived of as a contested field, riven by political and artistic pressures and by the struggle over the right to represent alternative visions of human experience in pictorial form. Rather than emphasise what is to be passed on by the tradition that putatively defines French art, tradition might best be understood as the

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12 Charles Maurras’s words are cited by Robert O. Paxton, “France: The Church, the Republic,” in Richard J. Wolff and Jörg K. Hoensch, eds., *Catholics, the State, and the European Radical Right 1919-1945* (Boulder, CO.: Social Science Monographs, 1987), 82.

very struggle over the right to transmit or donate, from one generation to another, a set of privileged values, principles and practices of art-making. In this sense too, we may better begin to comprehend the momentous consequences of the wartime struggles over tradition for the postwar period. As discussed in Natalie Adamson’s concluding essay on the collapse of operating boundaries between academic art and avant-garde art, and the emergence of telling terms such as arrière-garde and neo-avant-garde, modernism might be said to have triumphed by the end of the 1950s. But the shattering of the prewar utopian faith of the avant-gardes by fascism, the war, and the Holocaust, recused any secure sense of progress.

Terms and Categories

In the process of working with four of the terms typically deployed to categorize traditional art, each essay in this volume contributes to the ongoing task of clarifying what it meant to be modern in the French art world between 1900 and 1960. For it is clear that all of the terms cited operated in a dialogical and synchronic relationship to emerging definitions of modern art and modernism, often dubbed art indépendant or art vivant at the time, and to the conceptualisation of avant-garde as a dominant paradigm for artistic practice. Rather than assume that academic, official, pompier or arrière-garde automatically situated the art these terms described in the realm of the second-rate (as those who used the terms typically intended), the essays outline and analyse the polemical and rhetorical strategies that gave meaning to all of these categories, which had a real ability to elevate or to marginalise an artist’s work.

In this light it is important to note that artists who had received their training principally at the École des Beaux-Arts rather than at one of the

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independent, private academies or ateliers, and whose work depended upon a more or less naturalistic approach in which the legibility of the representation largely avoided the types of deliberate distortion or abstraction introduced by Fauve and Cubist artists—artists, in other words who might broadly be considered traditional—were in the majority in France until at least the 1920s. Although it is beyond the scope of this book to trace in detail the means by which “modern” artists won out over their traditional counterparts in the middle of the twentieth century, this gradual process provides the necessary backdrop for understanding the aesthetic and institutional choices made by artists, curators and art critics during the period 1900-1960. As several studies have detailed, modern art (or *l’art vivant*) triumphed initially at the commercial level and only later within the institutional sphere. The first significant breakthrough came in the second half of the 1920s, when prices for recent works by modern artists decisively outstripped those of their traditional counterparts for the first time. The stylistic innovations of modern art thus began to exert a financial attraction for younger artists as they mapped out their careers. Although the Great Depression narrowed the price gap as the art market, both domestically and internationally, experienced a dramatic contraction, traditional art never again had the same commercial allure as in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

But institutionally, the enhanced critical and market status of modern art was reflected in only a modest and piecemeal way before 1960. In 1925 numerous artists, arts bureaucrats and critics responded to the inquiry launched by the journal *L’Art Vivant*, “Pour un musée français d’art modérne,” to return a list of the top ten living artists: Matisse, Maillol, Derain, Dunoyer de Segonzac, Picasso, Utrillo, Rouault, Bonnard, Braque and Vlaminck. Not one of these artists, remarked the *enquête* editor, Georges Charensol, came from the Academy or the Salon des Artistes Français; they were all independent in their training. He might have added that as a group they were extremely poorly represented at the Musée du

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Luxembourg, the state museum responsible for showing the work of contemporary artists. 18 Although Christopher Green has identified isolated incidents during the 1920s that suggest a degree of openness to modern art by the State, it was not until the election of the Popular Front government in 1936 that a concerted attempt was made to acknowledge modernism at the official level. 19 The 1937 Paris Exposition Internationale, which opened a year into the Popular Front’s tenure, represented the high point of the interwar acknowledgement of modern art’s new status (the essays by Mark Antliff, Penelope Curtis and Kate Kangaslaiti in this volume all touch on aspects of the Exposition). A much more cautious approach had returned by 1942, when the Musée d’Art Moderne constructed by the State as part of the preparation for the Exposition opened its doors for the first time under the repressive auspices of the Vichy regime and German occupation. Noting the paucity of innovative modernist works on show (not one work by Picasso, for example), the young painter Jean Bazaine dismissed its contents as a “fine collection of daubs.” 20

Upon the Liberation of Paris in August 1944, the public profile of modern art was heightened by its “return” from exile and suppression during the “black years” of the war. This was announced by the presence of a generation of modernist painters that had absorbed the lessons of the Fauves and the Cubists, baptised the Nouvelle École de Paris by won-over critics, and by Picasso’s dominating presence at the Salon d’Automne (dubbed the “Salon de la Libération”). However, in spite of the interest in new art on the part of state art officials such as Jean Cassou (director) and Bernard Dorival (curator), the Musée d’Art Moderne collection was limited by its dependence upon gifts and bequests, and by a deep conservatism at the core of its organisation and of the state mechanisms of acquisition and commission. 21

Thus the polemical exchanges between modernists and traditionalists which characterise the period under study in this volume, sprinkled as they were with barbed insults, are the key symptom of a much more meaningful struggle for dominance than recent art history—written in the aftermath of the eventual triumph of modern forms—has tended to acknowledge. In the early decades of the twentieth century, traditional artists occupied a commanding position both commercially and institutionally, and they continued to fight a vigorous rearguard action at the institutional level even after the burgeoning Parisian art market of the 1920s overturned their market primacy. In this context, the eventual “victory” of the moderns has allowed the pejorative terms for the opposition to pass from the jargon of art criticism into the language of art history without serious evaluation. One important task here, therefore, is to conduct an initial inventory of terms and categories to begin to understand how each has been used.

Of “academic,” “official,” “pompier,” and “arrière-garde,” academic has the most thorough historical grounding, given that it derives from the Académie des Beaux-Arts, the most prestigious institution in the French art world from its foundation in 1648 until the late nineteenth century. But as a descriptive label, academic only began to be regularly used to categorize artists or their work after the Academy had been dissolved during the French Revolution and re-established under the Consulate in 1795 within the framework of the Institut de France. The Academy’s network of institutional influence and the artistic doctrines it promulgated were certainly not static during the nineteenth century, but they were sufficiently consistent to allow the designation of “academic” to acquire a

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22 For example, Yves Brayer (1907-1990) studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and won the Prix de Rome in 1930. He dedicated his work to the landscape and light of the south of France, showing frequently at the official Salons and at the Galerie de l’Élysée along with other painters from the Poetic Realist strand. The Dossier Brayer, Archives Nationales F21/6816, corroborates Raymonde Moulin’s finding that Brayer was the artist most bought by the State during the 1950s, when his works received extremely high prices.

23 Louis Dimier, *Histoire de la peinture française au XIXe siècle (1793-1903)*, 2nd edition (Paris: Librairie Delagrave, 1926), 249. Although French writers often use “Académie” and “Institut” interchangeably to describe the institution, perhaps because the Académie des Beaux-Arts was not formally re-established as an independent “class” within the Institut until 1816, “académique” is almost invariably used to characterize the artists and doctrines associated with it.
relatively stable meaning. Applied to an artist at the beginning of the twentieth century, this typically meant that they had studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris—where the majority of professors were or aspired to become members of the Academy—and competed for its highest honour, the Prix de Rome. In their subsequent careers, such artists could measure success in terms of tangible achievements such as purchases or commissions of their work by the State, service on state committees, a professorship at the École des Beaux-Arts and their own eventual election to the Academy. Artists who followed this career trajectory would exhibit at the Salon of the Société des Artistes Français (the continuation of the state-run Salon that had existed until 1880), or at the Salon of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, established in 1890 as an alternative to the Salon of the Société des Artistes Français but quickly reputed for its conservatism. The Société desArtistes Français offered a complex hierarchy of attainments by which members could gauge the progress of their careers: “honourable mentions”; third, second and first class medals that entitled their holder to exemption from submitting works to the jury; and ultimately, for the most successful, a Medal of Honour awarded at each year’s Salon.

This typical academic professional career path remained intact through to the mid-twentieth century, even if the commercial success and critical recognition it was likely to garner declined rapidly after 1920. During the nineteenth century, it also became associated with a specific artistic doctrine with implications for both the style and the subject matter of the works produced by artists who followed this course. The most thorough historical examination of academic doctrine remains Albert Boime’s *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (1971). By focusing on the central role that pedagogy played in transmitting the standards of the Academy, Boime shed light on the way in which certain features of academic art remained constant throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries while others witnessed notable changes. Thus the almost exclusive emphasis on the nude male figure that characterizes French art of the early nineteenth century, when Jacques-Louis David’s influence was at its strongest, gave way in the second half of the century to a preference for the female nude in academic painting. But the technique used to represent the nude body, based upon a rigorous sequence of drawing exercises and emphasizing clarity of outline, careful modelling, and a smooth, clean finish, was remarkably consistent. Following the

invention of photography in 1839 and its rapid expansion as a medium for documenting the real, academic painting technique moved still further towards a quasi-photographic precision of detail delivered by very tight brushwork and a high degree of almost lacquered surface polish. The painter Jean-Léon Gérôme, famed for his Orientalist scenes, was perhaps the most proficient exponent of this technique, which is sometimes dubbed Academic Realism. During the same period the expectation that academic painting would focus on biblical themes or scenes from classical history or mythology broke down completely. Artists began to draw fairly indiscriminately from European history, from literary sources of all periods, and from the history and contemporary mores of non-Western cultures. By the beginning of the twentieth century, there was also a thriving industry in society portraits executed using academic technique; beyond this the most common subject was the female nude, whose presence could be justified by a wide range of subjects: classical goddesses, allegorical figures, odalisques, slave markets, bathing scenes, and even witches’ covens (assumed to assemble in a state of undress). At the turn of the twentieth century it was still meaningful to describe an artist as academic given his institutional affiliations and professional goals, or to describe artworks as such on the basis of style, often in combination with subject matter. It was just as likely, however, that an

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28 The gender bias of this sentence is deliberate: academic institutions in France were only opened up to women starting at the end of the nineteenth century. See Marina Sauer, *L’Entrée des Femmes à l’École des Beaux-Arts, 1880-1923* (Paris: École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1990).
artist or critic hostile to academicism would dub such artists or artworks “pompier,” literally meaning “fireman” (the word serves as an adjective as well as a noun in French). The origins of the term have been difficult to identify. Jacques Thuillier suggests that it was a form of studio slang picked up by critics around the middle of the nineteenth century. He proposes three explanations for this curious designation: it may have come from the visible resemblance between the helmets worn by classical heroes in Davidian history painting and the helmets worn by French firefighters of the period; it was possibly a corruption of *pompéiste*, a label sometimes used to describe the group of “Neo-Greek” painters around Gérôme at mid-century; or it may have actually been a tribute to the platoons of uniformed men who were customarily present at the official openings of the state-sponsored Salon.  

Louis-Marie Lécharny adds that “pompier” must have been a widely-accepted alternative for “academic” by 1880, when the critic Théodore de Banville entitled a comic fable on academic painting for the front page of *Gil Blas* “Le Pompier.”  

Here de Banville derided the replacement of original inspiration and study after nature by formulaic recipes that guaranteed salon medals, stateroom commissions, and a statue erected in the artist’s honour in some provincial home town, guarded by a striking nude ghost wearing the gilded fireman’s helmet! Thuillier and Lécharny agree that “pompier” was used pejoratively from the beginning, and that it lent itself well to the task of derogation because of its alliterative similarity to *pompeux* (pompous). “Pompier” also allowed livelier punning than “academic”: Thuillier cites Edgar Degas’s dismissal of Albert Besnard, an academic artist who began to incorporate elements of Impressionist technique into his work from the 1880s onwards, as “un pompier qui a pris feu” (a fireman who has caught fire); and Gérôme’s droll defence of academic practice, “Il est plus facile d’être incendiare que pompier” (It is easier to be an arsonist than a fireman). 

These kinds of off-the-cuff but pointed comments—one a modern artist’s dismissal of the conventional painter’s efforts to become a little more *à la mode*, the other a supreme academician re-tooling the derogatory epithet to his own favour—underline the rhetorical power, as

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30 Lécharny, *L’Art Pompier*, 13ff (see n. 25).


Introduction

well as the contingency, of the terminology. Many of the essays that follow—whether they focus on artists, art critics or institutions—examine links between the construction of hierarchies, distinctions and categories, and the deployment of an inventive and targeted vocabulary designed to mark out boundaries. Several essays in this book are specifically concerned with art criticism as a source of labels designed both to demarcate territory in a crowded art world and to establish the critic’s own standing in a competitive field. Against this background, it is perhaps not surprising that the labels coined in such profusion often reveal a mismatch with the artworks themselves.33

The fluidity of critical discourse is indicated by the interchangeable application of academic and pompier through the first half of the twentieth century, with the latter having the polemical benefit of not being affiliated to a specific set of institutions; this permitted it, on many occasions, to become a general term of abuse for artists or movements not committed to modernist formal innovation (including, later, both Surrealism and Socialist Realism).34 Both these epithets, however, have a clearer and more reliable meaning than “official,” the designation Cassou used to identify a distinct realm of art requiring investigation. The term has been in use almost continuously since the nineteenth century and during that time its meaning has not remained constant. Its most dependable connotation, although even this is not invariably present, is the assumed link between “official art” and government objectives. As Lécharny observes, official art is “attached to the State, even at the service of that State.”35 Consequently, if an official art is to display its status by recognisable visual characteristics, then it might be presumed that the State is in control of a clear and relatively consistent idea of the style and subject matter of the art it wants to promote.

For most of the Third Republic, supporters of modern art firmly believed that the State was in the Academy’s pocket as far as artistic policy went, with the implication that any official art would be academic

34 The term “pompier” experienced a revival in popularity after the Musée d’Orsay opened in 1986, showing traditional artists alongside their modern counterparts. See McWilliam, “Limited Revisions,” for a discussion of the debates prompted by the opening of the museum and by wider scholarly efforts to rehabilitate nineteenth-century academic painting at this time.
35 “attaché à l’État, au service même de cet État” Lécharny, L’Art Pompier, 65.