

## DeLouche on Kearns and Mill, eds. (2015)

Kearns, James, and Alister Mill, editors. *The Paris Fine Art Salon/Le Salon, 1791–1881*. French Studies of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, 33. Peter Lang, 2015, pp. 516, ISBN 978-3-0343-1778-8

Sean DeLouche, Baylor University

This volume is a valuable and long overdue study of the Salon, the most important regular exhibition of contemporary art in the world for nearly 150 years. This art exhibition, which earned its name from the Salon Carré in the Louvre where it was held between 1725 and 1848, was organized intermittently from its establishment in 1667 and annually (with few interruptions) since 1831 until its official dissolution in 1881. By the nineteenth century, most artists and critics recognized the Salon as the most important venue for the display of contemporary art, as the place where artistic careers were made or ruined. For the general public too it was the artistic event of the year in France and indeed in the Western world, with annual attendance surpassing one million visitors in the 1840s. Despite the Salon's towering importance in nineteenth-century French cultural history, there has been no serious recent historical study dedicated to the Salon's post-1789 period.

Kearns and Mill's volume is the spectacular result of a collaborative effort to provide a historical examination of the nineteenth-century Salon. The twenty-three essays, written in English and French by established specialists of the Salon and by emerging scholars, were selected from papers presented at a three-day conference at the University of Exeter in 2013. The conference also accompanied an art exhibition titled *The Paris Fine Art Salon, 1791–1881*. Funded by a UK Arts & Humanities Research Council project (*Painting for the Salon? The French State, Artists and Academy, 1830–1852*), Kearns and Mill challenge the long-held "single history" view that nineteenth-century French art and the Salon were inseparable. They argue that this is a reductive history and one that reinforces the modernist narrative that cast the Salon as the conservative counterforce to the avant-garde. Instead, they study the Salon within a broad network of relationships between the State, artists, the Académie des Beaux-Arts, critics, and the public. Kearns and Mill set their examination of the nineteenth-century Salon within two appropriate historical bookends: 1791 when the Revolutionary government, as part of its radical democratizing of institutions, took control of the Salon away from the Académie Royale and opened the exhibition to all artists, not just Academicians and French citizens; and 1881, the year that the government yielded the organization of the beleaguered Salon to a private association of artists.

While it offers a wide historical range, this volume makes its most valuable contributions to the history of the Salon during the woefully understudied periods of the July Monarchy and Second Republic. A critical phase in French art history, the 1830s and 1840s saw the maturation of art journalism, record numbers of submissions and attendance, and, at the same time, the pivotal decision by many artists to turn away from the Salon and seek other means of display. Though there are remarkable case studies of artists and certain aspects of the Salon as an institution (notably Andrew Shelton's *Ingres and His Critics*), no overarching history of the exhibition during this period has been written in over a century. This volume thus offers welcome new perspectives.

For instance, Harriet Griffiths challenges in her essay one of the longest-held preconceptions of the Salons during the July Monarchy: that the admissions jurists (all members of the Académie) were dogmatic, out-of-touch conservatives who habitually rejected the works of more innovative artists. Examining the jury's composition and reports, Griffiths reveals that, in fact, the artist members were quite diverse and that the jury routinely struggled to form a consensus. As Griffiths notes, the enduring misconception comes from the pronouncements of outspoken art journalists who in the 1830s and 1840s regularly opened their Salon reviews with fierce denunciations of the jury. Such a rereading demonstrates how critics, during this age of rapidly expanding journalism, had an interest in attacking the credibility of the Academic jury and were increasingly setting themselves up as the more accurate arbiters of artistic opinion.

Perhaps most profoundly, this volume powerfully demonstrates the benefits that digital tools and methods can bring to the study of nineteenth-century French art history. For example, members of the team created a digital transcription of the three main sets of Salon registers (of works, of artists, and of jury decisions) located in the Archives des Musées nationaux. This was expanded into a database of all entries to the Salon between 1827 and 1850, a total of over 80,000 submitted works by some 9,000 different artists. All entries contain important data, such as a work's registration number and jury voting scores, and are supplemented with artists' biographical details and cross-referenced information from other registers. Griffiths used her findings from the database to reassess the Salon jury of the July Monarchy. In his article, Mill provides a sweeping overview of the composition and behavior of Salon artists based on statistical findings. Mill shares factoids—that the typical age of Salon artists remained thirty-three, that the number of foreign-born exhibitors averaged around twelve percent, and that the tactic

observed by many artists of submitting works in phases did indeed increase the chances of admission. One especially interesting statistic is that the number of portraits consistently averaged around thirty percent of the works on display at the Salons throughout the July Monarchy. I would like to point out that this challenges the common refrain of many art critics who complained that the number of portraits was growing year by year. This publicly accessible and searchable database will no doubt be a helpful tool to future scholars of the Salon ([www.salonartists.org](http://www.salonartists.org)).

In this brief review, I could not do justice to the twenty-three essays in this volume by summarizing each one, but I can say that together they offer innovative and welcome perspectives to the understudied history of the Salon during its decisive years. This volume is a must for cultural historians of nineteenth-century France, university libraries, and anyone interested in successful digital humanities projects.

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