

Wright on Harkett and Hornstein, eds. (2017)

Harkett, Daniel, and Katie Hornstein, editors. *Horace Vernet and the Thresholds of Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture*. Dartmouth College P, 2017, pp. xviii + 283, 16 color plates, ISBN 978-1-5126-0042-1

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Inspired by an academic session of the Association of Art Historians in 2013, this book could hardly be more topical at a time when news oscillates between the real and the fictional in the world of “post-truth,” “alternative facts,” and existential questions concerning the nature of truth itself. Horace Vernet, born a fortnight before the storming of the Bastille into a career as visual chronicler of national history, deftly circumnavigated changing political events and values in the art world, embraced new technologies in the print media, and came to be the focus of the debate on “le Vrai” and “le Beau”—one of the hottest topics in nineteenth-century France. Supported by Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, but reviled by Charles Baudelaire in his 1846 and 1859 Salons, Vernet, who died in 1863—the same year as Delacroix—subsequently plunged from celebrity into obscurity. Tellingly, the last monographic publication on Vernet in France dates to a 1980 exhibition in Rome and Paris, while the most recent monograph on him in English appeared as long ago as 1880. Valued posthumously by historians for the accuracy of his visual testimony—down to his depiction of the buttons on military uniforms—Vernet is now experiencing something of a comeback among art historians, as this excellent volume testifies. A major part of its success is due to its tripartite organization, which crosses thresholds, as its subtitle promises, between the public image of Vernet, the artist’s attempts to unseat history painting in favor of genre and less antiquated subject matter, and finally, his creative engagement with modern visual technologies. This broad approach, involving essays by well-established specialists as well as early-career researchers, reveals the complexity of the issues at stake.

Dwindling official patronage in the post-revolutionary era meant that artists had to build their own reputations as well as convince others of the value of their works. As shown by Rachel Esner, Vernet was second to none in his use of the illustrated press to achieve this end. He had already turned the rejection of his two battle paintings from the Salon of 1822 to his advantage by getting increased publicity for his studio exhibition in what Daniel Harkett carefully tracks as the emerging “Nouvelle Athènes” district of Paris. In relation to the propaganda required by Vernet’s patrons in his heroic pictures of French victory in Algeria, Nicolas Schaub reveals the disgust that the artist sometimes expressed privately. Vernet succeeded as a rebel during the Restoration and as an officially employed military painter in the July Monarchy. When it came to the Second Empire, as shown by Julia Thoma in her skillful exposition of Vernet’s contribution to the rise of mass consumer culture, the aging artist adapted to the changed political situation by emphasizing the continuity in action of the *Armée d’Afrique*, under the imperial eagle. While the art critics despaired over Vernet’s deathblow to history painting, the bourgeoisie wallowed in the entertainment and spectacle provided by his *Capture of the Smalah* at the *Exposition universelle* of 1855. This, however, marked the final heyday of Vernet’s career, since, with the Crimean War, the public was becoming avid for the depiction of horrors and atrocities. After the high point of Vernet’s reputation at the *Exposition universelle* of 1867, his work sank into oblivion.

One of the many interesting essays in this volume is by Allan Doyle on Vernet’s Directorship of the French Academy in Rome from 1829 to 1835. A controversial candidate, said to have secured the post through powerful political support, Vernet was suspected of seeking to compensate for his lack of training in high-style painting. He quickly came into conflict with Antoine Quatremère de Quincy, the then permanent secretary of the Academy of Fine Arts. Against the backdrop of Vernet’s painting *Raphael at the Vatican* (1832), Doyle shows how the dispute between these men centered not merely on Vernet’s challenge to academic orthodoxy in the elevation of genre to the status of history painting, but also on questions of production and pedagogy: Vernet sought to give freer rein to the already highly qualified artists working under his aegis, whereas Quatremère de Quincy’s concern was to defend this oasis of art from the demands of mercantile speculation.

Katie Hornstein’s essay on the prolific Vernet’s *facilité* effectively encapsulates the main argument of the volume. Encompassing so many themes and genres, with such a variety of media, and capturing the quick fire of rapid events and the instantaneity of photography, the long-term legacy of Vernet’s art poses as many questions as it answers. In pointing out how Baudelaire derisively branded Vernet a “gazetier” and chose to forget that the images of his hero, Constantin Guys, were created for reproduction in illustrated newspapers, the editors of this volume rightly highlight the value of Vernet’s challenging of traditional distinctions between “high” and “low” art, emergent and established media. As pointed out brilliantly by Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, 1859 emerges, yet again, as the turning point of the nineteenth century—the year when photography made its first entry into the official Salon and when, echoing Théophile Silvestre’s 1857 hostile slating of Vernet, Baudelaire conflated his dislike of this new medium with scorn for what he saw as the superficiality of Vernet’s non-

poetic veracity: for Baudelaire, such meticulously precise reproductions of the real were equivalent to a travesty of the truth—a lie. Today’s embedded photojournalists, reporting back to mass media and prey to the potentially distorting effects of social networking, face challenges not fundamentally dissimilar to those confronted by Vernet.

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