Introduction

This book puts forward an interpretation of the evolution of painting in France between the early and mid-1750s—the moment, roughly, of the advent of Vien and Greuze—and 1781, the year David's Bélisaire was exhibited at the Salon. The past two decades have seen an enormous increase of art historical activity in the general area of the second half of the eighteenth century, and I am glad to acknowledge at the outset the very considerable extent to which in this present study I have made use of the findings of my predecessors. But I am also acutely aware that the ideas put forward in the pages that follow differ radically from those to be found in the previous literature on the subject (unless one counts as part of that literature the writings of critics contemporary with the art itself). Some sort of introduction therefore seems advisable, if only to assure the reader that I am conscious of that difference. In addition, I shall take the opportunity to make a few brief observations both about my procedures in this book and about some of the ramifications of the account presented in it. By doing this I do not expect to disarm criticism, an impossible ideal under any circumstances and one particularly out of place in a book that apprehends itself to be saying something new. Rather, I hope to remove grounds for misunderstanding, so that those who are driven to complain about what I have done will at least have an unobstructed view of their target. There are six points in all that I wish to make.

1. The first point to be underscored is the obvious one that this study is exclusively concerned with developments in France. The point is worth underscoring because the emphasis in much recent scholarship has been on the international scope of developments in the arts in the second half of the eighteenth century. In fact the attainment of a truly international view of those
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developments has been one of the triumphs of recent art history.\textsuperscript{2} But triumphs have their cost, and the cost in this instance has been a willingness to minimize or ignore differences between national traditions. Specifically, I am convinced that there took place in French painting starting around the middle of the century a unique and very largely autonomous evolution; and it is the task of comprehending that evolution as nearly as possible in its own terms—that laying bare the issues crucially at stake in it—that is undertaken in the pages that follow. It should be noted, too, that the international emphasis to which I have alluded has gone hand in hand with a widespread interest in Neoclassicism, an international style or movement almost by definition,\textsuperscript{3} and that one concomitant of the exclusively national emphasis of this study is that except very occasionally the topic of Neoclassicism does not arise. (I speak repeatedly of a reaction against the Rococo on the part of French painters and critics of the period, but I do so without equating that reaction with the advent of Neoclassicism, a far more nebulous event with which I am not concerned.) Finally, I do not mean by my assertion of the uniqueness and relative autonomy of the French developments analyzed in this study either to deny all influence of the painting of other countries on French painting after midcentury\textsuperscript{4} or to imply that the developments in question bear no resemblance to any elsewhere.\textsuperscript{5} But the particular concerns that are the focus of my investigation appear to have been indigenous to France. And I have chosen to forego comparisons with the art of other nations on the grounds that they would take us far afield and would further complicate an already difficult task of exposition and analysis.

2. It is a commonplace that the middle of the eighteenth century in France saw the invention of art criticism as we know it.\textsuperscript{6} But I think it is fair to say that historians of art have made surprisingly little use as evidence of the large amount of writing about painting that has survived from the decades before 1781, even though the general level of the writing is respectable and a few of the critics rank among the finest pictorial intelligences of the age. (By use as evidence I mean something other than use as illustration, i.e., the quotation out of context of a few sentences to clinch a point that has already been made and is usually regarded as wholly obvious.)\textsuperscript{7} The present study attempts to make up for that neglect. Thus commentaries by Diderot, La Font de Saint-Yenne, Grimm, Laugier, and perhaps a dozen others are allowed to direct our attention to features of the painting of their contemporaries which until now have simply never been perceived—or if such a statement seems extreme, have never since that period been constructed to possess the particular significance which, on the strength of those commentaries, we are led to impute to them. At the same time it must be recognized—this point deserves special emphasis—that not just the painting but the criticism as well stands in need of interpretation. For that reason a large portion of this study is given over to close readings of critical and theoretical texts. (Chapter two, a discussion of the renewal of interest in the doctrines of the hierarchy of genres and the supremacy of history painting, consists of nothing else.) Moreover, just as the criticism helps light the way to a new and improved understanding of the painting, so the painting is instrumental to our efforts to make improved sense of the criticism. By this I mean that it is only by coming to see the appropriateness of a given painting or group of paintings of certain verbal formulations, stylistic devices, and rhetorical strategies, including many that have never until now been taken seriously, that we are able to attribute to those formulations, devices, and strategies a truly critical significance. The result is a double process of interpretation by virtue of which paintings and critical texts are made to illuminate one another, to establish and refine each other’s meanings, and to provide between them compelling evidence for the centrality to the pictorial enterprise in France during those years of a body of concerns whose very existence has not been imagined.

3. As my title implies, the writings of Denis Diderot play a major role in this study—a larger and more essential role than is played by the work of any single painter of the period. The first chapter is largely concerned with pictures exhibited at the Salons of 1753 and 1755, before Diderot turned his hand to art criticism. (His first Salon was composed in 1759 for Grimm’s Correspondance littéraire, where seven of his eight subsequent Salons also appeared,\textsuperscript{8} if one can speak of anything “appearing” in a private newsletter circulated in manuscript to a few royal houses outside France.)\textsuperscript{9} Chapters two and three, however, as well as the last portion of chapter one, are mainly devoted to a sustained effort to see the painting of his age through his eyes. On the basis of that effort I am finally led to conclude, first, that there are in his Salons and affiliated texts two distinct but intimately related conceptions of the art of painting, epitomized by the art of Greuze and that of Joseph Vernet among his contemporaries; and second, that each of those conceptions involves a specific, paradoxical relationship between painting and beholder. My title further suggests that I regard the issue of the relationship between painting and beholder as a matter of vital importance. In fact it is the crux of the story I have to tell, and the essentialness of Diderot to my story may be summed up in the acknowledgment that that crux would remain merely speculative but for the evidence provided by his writings. It should also be noted that my reliance on Diderot has imposed certain limitations on the shape and focus of this study. For example, my decision to say very little about specific paintings of the 1770s reflects the fact that Diderot wrote only two comparatively mediocre Salons in the course of that decade.\textsuperscript{10} But it is part of the claim that I make for the historical significance of Diderot’s achievement as a critic that the issues which in his writings of the 1750s and 1760s are held to be central to the pictorial enterprise actually were central to the evolution of painting in France, and not just during those years but throughout the decades that followed. (I had better add that I do not pretend to be able to interpret in those terms more than a fraction of the paintings made and exhibited in the Salons during that period. My claims are modest as well as large.) And in the analysis of David’s Bélisario.
that brings chapter three to a close, I examine in detail the workings of the Diderotian problematic of painting and beholder in what is arguably the single most important canvas by a French painter of the early 1780s.

3. The developments analyzed in this study constitute only the opening phase of a larger evolution the full extent of which I hope eventually to chart. Crucial figures in that evolution include David, Géricault, Courbet, and Manet, each of whom may be shown to have come to grips with one primitive condition of the art of painting—that its objects necessarily impede the presence before them of a beholder. Seen in this perspective, the evolution of painting in France between the start of the reaction against the Rococo and Manet’s seminal masterpieces of the first half of the 1860s, traditionally discussed in terms of style and subject matter and presented as a sequence of ill-defined and disjoint epochs or movements—Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Realism, etc.—may be grouped as a single, self-renewing, in important respects dialectical undertaking. This is not to say that the traditional art historical categories of style and subject matter are irrelevant to our understanding of the paintings in question. It is to suggest that the stylistic and iconographic diversity that we associate with the history of French painting between David and Manet was guided, and in large measure determined, by certain ontological preoccupations which first emerged as crucial to painting in the period treated in this study. Obviously I cannot attempt to summarize later developments in a brief introduction. But the centrality to those developments of issues involving the relationship between painting and beholder may perhaps be evoked by asking the reader who is familiar with the following works to reflect, after finishing this study, on the sense in which the choice of moment and other aspects of the composition of Géricault’s Raft of the Medusa may be seen as motivated by the desire to escape the theatricalizing consequences of the beholder’s presence; on the implications of Courbet’s repeated attempts in his early self-portraits to transpose himself bodily into the painting; and on the significance of the alienating, distancing character of the chief female figure’s frontal gaze in Manet’s Déjeuner sur l’herbe and Olympia.11

5. Nowhere in the pages that follow is an effort made to connect the art and criticism under discussion with the social, economic, and political reality of the age. This requires comment. Historians of art have traditionally attempted to explain salient features of French painting in the second half of the eighteenth century in terms of the emergence of a sizable middle-class public to whose vulgar and inarticulate tastes, it is alleged, much of that painting sought to appeal. As will become plain, I regard such attempts as misconceived; and my emphasis throughout this study on issues of an altogether different sort is intended at once to repudiate prevailing social interpretations of the subject and to dissolve various confusions to which those interpretations have given rise. It does not follow, however, that I believe that the evolution of French painting between the early 1750s and 1781 took place in a vacuum, isolated from society and uncontaminated by its stresses. Rather, I see the constitutive importance conferred by my account on the relationship between painting and beholder as laying the groundwork for a new understanding of how the “internal” development of the art of painting and the wider social and cultural reality of France in the last decades of the Ancien Régime were implicated and so to speak intertwined with one another. I should also say that I am skeptical in advance of any attempt to represent that relationship and that development as essentially the products of social, economic, and political forces defined from the outer as fundamental in ways that the exigencies of painting are not. In addition, it must be borne in mind—I am assuming now that the claims put forward in the previous paragraph are correct—that especially starting with the advent of David, the vision of the painting-beholder relationship as I have described it in these pages actually proved amazingly fruitful for the pictorial enterprise in France as regards the artistic level or quality of the works it helped engender. Any thoroughlygoing social-historical (e.g., Marxist) interpretation of that material will have to reckon with that fact.12

6. The last point I want to make is a somewhat delicate one. In several essays on recent abstract painting and sculpture published in the second half of the 1960s I argued that much seemingly difficult and advanced but actually ingratesing and mediocre work of those years sought to establish what I called a theatrical relation to the beholder, whereas the very best recent work—the paintings of Louis, Noland, Oliatski, and Stella and the sculptures of Smith and Caro—were in essence anti-theatrical, which is to say that they treated the beholder as if he were not there.13 I do not intend to rehash those arguments in this introduction. But as my title once again makes clear, the concept of theatricality is crucial to my interpretation of French painting and criticism in the age of Diderot, and in general the reader who is familiar with my essays on abstract art will be struck by certain parallels between ideas developed in those essays and in this book. Here too I want to assure the reader that I am aware of those parallels, which have their justification in the fact that the issue of the relationship between painting (or sculpture) and beholder has remained a matter of vital if often submerged importance to the present day. Read in that spirit, this book may be understood to have something to say about the eighteenth-century beginnings of the tradition of making and seeing out of which has come the most ambitious and exalted art of our time.
NOTES TO PAGES 1–2: Introduction

1. Something should be said at the outset about the institution of the Salon, or official exhibition of paintings, sculptures, and engravings by members of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, which provided by far the most conspicuous vehicle by which French artists of the period made and sustained their reputations. The earliest such exhibition was held in 1667, after which others followed, for the most part every other year, until 1699. After an almost complete lapse of several decades, the institution was revived on a regular basis in 1737 and, except for 1744 and 1749, was held annually until 1751; from 1751 until 1795, which is to say throughout the period treated in this book, it took place every other year. Starting in 1725 the exhibition occupied the Salon Carré du Louvre—hence the term “Salon”—although on occasion other spaces were used as well. Throughout the period the Salon ran from 25 August until at least the end of September, it was open to the public free of charge and always drew large crowds. On the occasion of each exhibition, the Académie published a brochure ou évent in which were listed by number all the works on view; in this study I cite that number for each painting that I discuss. One slightly confusing point that should be noted is that critical commentaries on those exhibitions are known generically as Salons (italized). For a brief discussion of the history of the Salon down to Diderot’s time, including further details about the organization of the exhibitions, see Jean Adhémar, “Les Salons de l’Académie au XVIIIe siècle,” Salons, 1, 8–15.

2. No one has contributed more to that triumph than Robert Rosenblum, whose Transformations in Late Eighteenth-Century Art (Princeton, 1967) is probably the most influential treatment of the subject since Loquet (see below, n. 4). See also Rosenblum’s doctoral dissertation, The International Style of 1800: A Study in Linear Abstraction, Diss., New York University, 1956 (New York, 1976).


5. I owe to the late Anthony M. Clark the suggestion that significant affinities may exist between the French painting that I describe as absorptive and contemporaneous painting in Rome. Almost all the painters I discuss spent several years in Rome as an early stage of their careers; indeed Viollet painted in Rome his Ermitage d’endormi, a work whose absorptive character I analyze at some length (see chapter one, pp. 28–32).


7. Modern discussions of Greuze’s art abound with the use of criticism as illustration. For example, it is now by traditional to assert simply on the basis of a superficial description of paintings such as the Pièce de théâtre and the jeune fille qui pleure son amant that they were intended by their creator to satisfy the “literary” tastes of the public of his time, and then to quote portions of Diderot’s admiring commentaries on those paintings as “proof” that that was indeed their appeal. The sterility of this procedure will I trust become more long before the end of the first chapter.

8. Diderot composed Salons for the exhibitions of 1759, 1761, 1763, 1765, 1767, 1769, 1771, 1775, and 1781. The only Salon not to appear in the Corr. litt. is that of 1771, a problematic text in several respects. See the discussion of that Salon by Jean Seznec, "Préface," Salons, IV, viii–x.

9. Subscribers to the Corr. litt. in the late 1750s and 1760s probably numbered less than twenty; they included the empress of Russia, the queen of Sweden, the king of Poland, the duchess of Sax-Gotha, and other prominent figures of royal rank. For a discussion of this and other questions connected with the production and distribution of the Corr. litt., see Jeanne R. Monty, La Critique littéraire et Méthode Griseux (Geneva and Paris, 1961), pp. 26–31. One consequence of the appearance of Diderot’s Salons only in the Corr. litt. is that they along with the Essais sur la peinture remained almost wholly unknown in France during his lifetime. Their actual publication in France began in 1795 (seven years after his death); it was not until 1857 that all the Salons had been published at least once. For details of their publication see Seznec, "Préface,Salons, I, vii, n. 1.

10. In Seznec’s words, Diderot in the 1770s “n’est pas seulement un guide intermit- tent, c’est un guide fatigué” (in not only an intermittent guide; he is a tired guide) "Préface," Salons, IV, viii). Seznec also remarks astutely: “Ces lacunes [the Salons of the 1770s Diderot did not review] sont d’autant plus regrettables que pendant ces dix années s’est affirmée cette double évolution de l’art français vers le ‘grand goît’ néo-classique et vers l’inspiration nationale que Diderot lui-même avait contribué à fa- toiser; les Expositions de 1773, 1777, et 1779 marquent à cet égard des étapes capitailes . . . [Cette discontinuité reste déplorable; elle fausse, pour nous, la perspective de cette décennie] (These lacunae are all the more regrettable because, during those ten years, that double evolution of French art toward Neoclassic taste and toward national sources of inspiration that Diderot himself had helped to promote grew stronger. The Salons of 1773, 1777, and 1779 mark important stages in this development . . . This discontinuity remains deplorable; it distorts our perspective on that decade) (ibid.).
NOTES TO PAGES 4–8

11. For Géricault see the brief remarks in chapter three of this study, p. 154, as well as the discussion of his art in Michael Fried, "Thomas Couture and the Theatricalization of Action in 19th-Century French Painting," Artesian, 8, No. 10 (1970), 43. In that essay, too, I observe that Manet’s great paintings of the first half of the 1860s "may be said to take account of the beholder; in any event they refuse to accept the fiction that the beholder is not there, present before the painting, which Diderot a century before had insisted was crucial to the convincing representation of action" (45). See also Fried, "Manet’s Sources: Aspects of His Art, 1859–63," Artesian, 7, No. 7 (1969), nn. 27, 46, 72, 74. Theodore Reff on the other hand finds in Olympia’s gaze merely an adaptation of "one of the most familiar conventions of the erotic prints and photographs of the time, the enactment of a coyly inviting or contem- porarily cool glance" (Manet: "Olympia" [London, 1976], p. 58). On Courbet’s self-portraits see Fried, "The Beholder in Courbet: His Early Self-Portraits and Their Place in His Art," Glyph 4: Johns Hopkins Textual Studies (1978), pp. 85–129.

12. It may be objected that the concept of "artistic level or quality" is merely ideological, at once a specimen and an instrument of bourgeois mystification. This is not the place to address that issue, but it should be noted that the pioneering study of late eighteenth-century French art and literature, G. [original] [Vladimirovich] Plekhanov’s essay "French Dramatic Literature and French Eighteenth-Century Painting from the Sociological Standpoint" (1905), closes with an attempt to reconcile a social-historical interpretation of the art in question with a Kantian view of the nature of aesthetic judgment (Andrew Rothstein, ed., Art and Social Life, trans. Eleanor Fox and Eric Harty [London, 1953], pp. 164–65). The Kantian elements in Plekhanov’s thought have been repudiated by Lenin and others, but it may be doubted whether the questions raised by Plekhanov concerning the status of the individual’s experience of works of art have ever been answered satisfactorily from within a Marxist perspective.


CHAPTER ONE
The Primacy of Absorption