

Lectures on Art

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Texts & Documents

Selected *Conférences* from
the Académie Royale de Peinture
et de Sculpture, 1667–1772

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possesses all the qualities required for this task, having already displayed to the public his knowledge of painting and of sculpture; it would be especially fitting in that, as historiographer to the *bâtiments du roi*, he has, perforce, a particular obligation to record in writing whatever takes place in the Académie, whose principal goal is to embellish those very buildings [*bâtiments*].”³

Félibien therefore wrote a book-length account of the seven *conférence* sessions held in 1667, each of which took the form of a lecture followed by a debate. He presumably asked for the manuscript of each opening statement (all of which have disappeared) and then transcribed them as indirect speech, giving a description of the discussions that followed, but without identifying the speakers. We have attempted to supply the names of those speakers. Félibien added a long preface (thirty-five unnumbered pages) in which he sought to impart more coherence to these very diverse lectures, appropriating them by adding a great many of his own opinions. This found no favor with the academicians, who in 1668 demanded that he be relieved of the task of publishing the lectures.⁴

Félibien’s book seems to have enjoyed greater success outside the Académie. A second edition appeared the following year, and the volume was discussed at the Accademia di San Luca in Rome⁵ and translated into English in 1740.⁶ More recently, a German edition appeared,⁷ and there are several modern editions.⁸

Notes

1. Montaignon, *Procès-verbaux*, 1:318.
2. In Lichtenstein and Michel, *Conférences*, tome I, vol. 1, 106.
3. Montaignon, *Procès-verbaux*, 1:317.
4. Stefan Germer, *Kunst-Macht-Diskurs: Die intellektuelle Karriere des André Félibien im Frankreich von Louis XIV* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1997); René Démoris, “De la vérité en peinture chez Félibien et Roger de Piles: Imitation, représentation, illusion,” in “La naissance de la théorie de l’art en France, 1640–1720,” ed. Christian Michel and Maryvonne Saison, special issue, *Revue d’esthétique*, 31/32 (1997), 37–50; Christian Michel, “Les conférences académiques: Enjeux théoriques et pratiques,” in “La naissance de la théorie de l’art en France, 1640–1720,” 76.
5. Melchior Missirini, *Memorie per servire alla storia della romana Accademia di S. Luca fino alla morte di Antonio Canova* (Rome: De Romanis, 1823), 144–45.
6. André Félibien, *Seven Conferences Held in the King of France’s Cabinet of Paintings, . . . translated from the French of Felibien*, trans. Henri Testelin (London: T. Cooper, 1740), 63–81. Accessed via Eighteenth-Century Collections Online.
7. Jutta Held, *Französische Kunsttheorie des 17. Jahrhunderts und der absolutistische Staat: Le Brun und die ersten acht Vorlesungen an der königlichen Akademie* (Berlin: Reimer, 2001).
8. Henry Jouin, *Conférences de l’Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture: Recueillies, annotées et précédées d’une étude sur les artistes écrivains* (Paris: A. Quantin, 1883), 1–11; Alain Mérot, *Les conférences de l’Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: ENSBA, 1996), 60–67; Held, *Französische Kunsttheorie des 17. Jahrhunderts*, 270–84; and Lichtenstein and Michel, *Conférences*, tome I, vol. 1, 111–95.

1

CHARLES LE BRUN

Saint Michael Striking Down the Dragon by Raphael

7 May 1667

Lichtenstein and Michel, *Conférences*, tome 1, vol. 1, 111–20.

Source: André Félibien, *Conférences de l’Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture pendant l’année 1667* (Paris: Léonard, 1668), 1–16. The manuscript of the original lecture is lost.

Picture: The painting on which Le Brun spoke formed part of the collections of Francis I and is today in the Musée du Louvre (fig. 1). It was engraved by Gilles Rousselet in 1677 for the *Cabinet du roi*.

Observations: In his dealings with the Académie, Jean-Baptiste Colbert relied on Charles Le Brun (1616–90), and it is therefore unsurprising that Le Brun was the first rector of the institution to open a lecture-debate. His lecture displays certain prominent characteristics of academic thinking, such as the authority conferred on the great painters of the past and the primacy of the antique. It raises an issue that continued to be debated throughout the history of the Académie and went to the heart of the idea of imitation: Should the painter find his models in nature, painting, or both?

Le Brun seems to have had a particular affinity for this work by Raphael; there is an overt quotation of Raphael’s *Saint Michael* in Le Brun’s preparatory drawing (fig. 2) for *The Franche-Comté Conquered for the Second Time* in the Hall of Mirrors (Galerie des Glaces) at Versailles.

First Lecture-Debate Held in the Cabinet des Tableaux du Roi, Saturday, 7 May 1667

All the academicians and most of their students having assembled in the Cabinet des Tableaux du Roi (King’s picture gallery)¹ they saw before them Raphael’s *Saint Michael* placed in a favorable light.

[Félibien’s Description of the Picture]

This picture is 8 feet high by 5 feet wide.² In the middle of a broad landscape representing a desert region never yet inhabited, we see *Saint Michael* descending from the sky, holding the overthrown demon beneath him. The angel is supported in the air by two large wings. He is dressed in a cuirass made of golden scales to which is attached a sort of cloth-of-gold tunic in the Roman style, which falls no further than the knee. There is another tunic under this one, made of blue cloth

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CHARLES LE BRUN

The Manna in the Desert by Nicolas Poussin

5 November 1667

Lichtenstein and Michel, *Conférences*, tome I, vol. 1, 156–74.

Source: André Félibien, *Conférences de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture pendant l'année 1667* (Paris: Léonard, 1668), 76–107. The manuscript of the original lecture is lost.

Editions: Félibien revised his account of the lecture for his *Entretiens sur la vie les vies et sur les ouvrages des plus excellents peintres anciens et modernes*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Marbre-Cramoisy, 1688), 2:407–27. Pierre-Charles Lévesque partially paraphrases it in, under “Expression” in Claude-Henri Watelet and Pierre Charles Lévesque, *Encyclopédie méthodique: Beaux-Arts* (Paris: Panckouke, 1788), 1:271–89.

Picture: This picture (fig. 10) was painted between 1637 and 1639 for Paul Fréart de Chantelou; it belonged to Nicolas Fouquet and then (before 1667) Louis XIV. It is now in the Musée du Louvre (inv. 7275). It was engraved by Guillaume Chasteau in 1680 for the *Cabinet du roi* and by Henry Testelin in 1680 to illustrate the “Table sur l’ordonnance” in *Sentimens des plus habiles peintres du temps sur la pratique de la peinture et sculpture, recueillis et mis en tables de préceptes*.

Observations: This lecture is the most famous of those given in 1667. Le Brun may have seen Poussin’s letter to the painter Jacques Stella in which Poussin gives advice on the interpretation of the picture: “I found a certain distribution [of figures] for Monsieur de Chantelou’s picture, and certain natural postures, which manifest in the Jewish people the poverty and hunger to which it had been reduced and the joy and happiness it is now experiencing; the sense of wonder it feels and the respect and reverence that it has for its Legislator, with a mixture of women, children, and men of different ages and temperaments—these are, I believe, things that will not displease those who know how to read [a painting] well.”¹ As Charles Jouanny points out, the original of this letter has disappeared and we know it only by the quotation given in Félibien.² The debate focuses on verisimilitude; a final intervention, almost certainly by Félibien, establishes a comparison between painting and theater, arguing that the best way of making painting expressive is to choose the moment of *peripeteia* in the Aristotelian sense—that is, a reversal of fortune in the plot.

Sixth Lecture-Debate Held at the Académie Royale, Saturday, 5 November 1667

[I. Lecture]

Monsieur Le Brun told the Company that, since the works of the greatest painters of the two previous centuries had until then provided the subject matter for the



lecture-debates, it was only fair that those of a painter of its own time should also serve for discussion at the Académie.

The first time that he spoke in the assembly, he had [Monsieur Le Brun said] taken as the subject of his discourse a picture by Raphael, who had been the wonder of his century and the honor of his nation [see lecture #1].

But today he would speak about a picture by Monsieur Poussin, who had been the glory of our day and an ornament to his country.

He himself [Monsieur Le Brun said] had attempted to base his own studies on the divine Raphael, and the illustrious Monsieur Poussin had aided him with his advice and guided him in this lofty enterprise, so that he felt obliged to acknowledge these two great men as his masters and testify publicly to the fact.

When the paintings of Raphael and the painters of his century had been examined, everyone had indulged their own conjectures and deferred to their own feelings, because the colors used by [these painters] had not retained their original brilliance or their true shades and therefore one could not clearly see what that these great men had sought to represent, nor any longer discern all the beauty they had put into their works.³

But, since he had frequently had the privilege of conversing with the great man of whom he was proposing to speak and since Poussin’s pictures still had the

Fig. 10.
Nicolas Poussin (French,
1594–1665).

*The Israelites Gathering
Manna in the Desert*,
1637–39, oil on canvas,
149 × 200 cm.
Paris, Musée du Louvre,
inv. 7275.

[Afternoon]

Concerning the part of the day comprised between midday and sunset [fig. 29], Monsieur Bourdon said that it was liable to clouds, rain, and inconstant weather, particularly in the hot season, and that, on the basis of this unregulated and variable constitution, he had named it the hour of license, because it provided painters working on the composition of the picture with pleasing liberties. Thus, it is suitable for treating bacchanals, games, frolics, and enjoyable practices. The constitution of the air that follows rain embellishes landscapes with shafts of light on water, trees, and draperies, which form a light with more perceptible and natural reflection than at other times. He noted that Titian had often made use of this light with great success.¹⁷

He then said that he would not long dwell on this part of the day for fear that pupils might allow themselves to be excessively dazzled by its charms and make a habit of using this sort of light in all their subjects. He criticized those who confined themselves in this way to a single manner, accused their imagination of sterility and their works of tedious repetition; he praised those who sought to acquire a universal talent and to diversify their subjects by changes of light, the better to accommodate them [their subjects] to the particular times at which their principal action took place. He said that it would have been better if many of the great men of old¹⁸ had respected this choice and had not infected the mind of their disciples with a habit of constant imitation, because in that case they would have left us more accomplished works, though they are admirable in their way; thus, the Bassano family, which almost always used the light of dawn, and Caravaggio, who for the most part affected gloomy weather, would have carried their reputation still further if, by diversifying the positions of the sun and the parts of the day, they had learned from the school of Lombardy, which had followed the example of Titian, or from the school of Rome, which had followed the example of the Carracci, of which Monsieur Poussin had also made such good use.

[Sunset]

Then Monsieur Bourdon spoke of sunset (fig. 30), saying that this last part of the day was the hour of pleasure and marked the end of work; that it caused an agreeable inclination toward games, dancing, and walks; that it was at sunset that the general of an army assembled his soldiers and the shepherd his flocks; that, in short, everything at that hour prepared itself for pleasant and long-desired repose. He said that, in order to treat such subjects at that hour, one must attend to the different colors that the light of the sun borrows from the fiery exhalations and from the clouds of greater or lesser darkness through which it passes in order to reach us; normally, this color borders on the brilliance of gold, and it often becomes the dominant color in objects, being either borne there by direct light or by the light of reflection. This needs control and careful arrangement. But since that issue pertained to aerial perspective, which teaches the effect of daylight on

Fig. 29.
Sébastien Bourdon
(French, 1616–71).
The Return of the Ark,
1659, oil on canvas,
105.3 × 134.6 cm.
London, National Gallery,
NG64.

Fig. 30.
Sébastien Bourdon
(French, 1616–71).
Rest of the Holy Family,
1660, oil on canvas,
109.3 × 145 cm.
Brest, Musée des
Beaux-Arts.



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ANTOINE COYPEL

Color and Brushwork

8 July 1713

Lichtenstein and Michel, *Conférences*, tome IV, vol. 1, 72–89

Source: Antoine Coypel, *Discours prononcez dans les conférences de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* (Paris: Collombat, 1721), 84–97, 34–46. The manuscript of the original lecture is lost.

Observations: Concerned that his speeches on color and brushwork might seem to elevate Correggio to the status of an absolute model, Antoine Coypel begins by warning his audience against the less desirable features of this painter. The speech on color is carefully nuanced. It opens with a mocking account of the quarrels of the 1670s, which was for a long time our only source of information about them, before going on to demonstrate how indispensable color is to painting. Note that he categorizes chiaroscuro under draftsmanship and not, as Roger de Piles had done, under color. Like de Piles, he felt that the painter must improve what he saw in nature but he ranks the strong colors of Titian and Giorgione above the lighter-toned work of Rubens.

[Speech 1: Great Men's Faults]

Let no tinge of perversity persuade you to imitate
His foolish whims, where verve goes astray.
(Antoine Coypel, "Épître," vv. 61–62)

If I here attack that in Correggio which I believe should be condemned, I do so because the faults of great men are more apt than others to save us from our own errors. They make a greater impression on us and can deliver us from the vanity that stands in the way of our accepting the salutary advice that others can give. Just as we set their great talents as an example, so we should point out and avoid their faults.

Respect for the dead should not close our eyes to the fact that these artists were capable of error. Reputation does not establish the merit of a work; on the contrary, the merit of a work should establish its reputation; indeed, I wish the *curiosi* would focus more on discerning what is good and bad about a work, rather than giving exclusive attention to name, manner and whether or not the work is original—most of them dare not either praise or blame without this first, precautionary exercise, which then determines their views.¹



The grand style, grace, naïveté and charming brushwork of Correggio are the elements that should inspire us in this great painter but we should not on that account imitate the occasionally exaggerated postures of his figures, which are not always correct or well-suited to each other, or the confusion that often prevails in his groups. The dome that he painted in Parma is one example of this [fig. 40]. In his lifetime, the same prejudices were exhibited as we find today, and only the defects of the moderns were attended to; no one deigned to glance at what might merit praise; thanks to this strange error, Correggio's dome was so criticized for its faults that a question arose whether it should not simply be demolished, and no attention was given to the rare beauty for which it has since been admired. Yes, Gentlemen, they were ready to destroy a work that may be said to have shaped the taste of the Carracci and of so many other great men who were inspired by its grandeur, grace, and suavity, which can be found nowhere else.

Everyone knows that Titian, passing through Parma in the suite of Emperor Charles V, prevented this wonderful work from being destroyed. One day, while he was studying it with great attention, one of the main officials of this church came up to him and said that the horrible mess of painting that he was staring at was unworthy of Titian's gaze but that it was soon to be painted over. Astonished, Titian replied: "Do no such thing: if I were not Titian, I should like to be Correggio."

Fig. 40.
Correggio (Italian,
1489–1534).
Assumption of the Virgin
(detail), 1526–30, fresco,
1093 × 1195 cm.
Parma Cathedral.

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ANTOINE COYPEL

The Ancients and the Moderns

1 September 1714

Lichtenstein and Michel, *Conférences*, tome IV, vol. 1, 2010, 115–25.

Source: Antoine Coypel, *Discours prononcez dans les conférences de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture* (Paris: Collombat, 1721), 97–115. The manuscript of the original lecture is lost.

Observations: This speech was begun on 2 June 1714 and finished on 1 September. All discourse about drawing and proportions tended to establish antiquity as the model and foundation. But in his lecture, Coypel cites lines of verse praising antiquity in order to defend the art of the moderns. He thus takes a very moderate stance on the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, denouncing the prejudices by which ancient art had come to be esteemed above that of contemporaries, while defending the idea of progress, on condition the modern artist has studied the works of the ancients in order to surpass them or at least add to their beauties. This might be considered to follow on from the third part of the speech by his father, Noël, of 12 February 1699 (#19).

[The Ancients and the Moderns]

Drawing graceful copies of ancient sculpture
Complements naïve effects drawn from nature
(Antoine Coypel, “Épître,” vv. 89–90)

[Prejudice in Favor of the Ancients]

The most estimable works of sculpture are those made between the Peloponnesian War and the decadence of the Roman Empire. We know that painting and sculpture first appeared among the Egyptians and from there passed over to the Greeks, who by the superiority of their genius, their application to study, and the glorious recompenses with which they honored these arts carried them to such a degree of perfection as subsequent centuries and other nations seem to have been unable to attain. This must surely teach us that the age or modernity of a work should never be decisive in assessing its worth. For to the Greeks, the Egyptians were ancient and of inferior incapacity, while to the Romans, the Greeks were ancient and superior.

It is as equitable to esteem and applaud present merit as it is to admire and respect the great men whose works have, by the passage of the ages, been conse-

crated to posterity. “I am one of those who admire the ancients,” said Pliny the Younger, “but not to the extent of despising the genius of our own times, as some do. For nature is not so exhausted and worn out that she can no longer produce anything worthy of our praise.”¹

If everyone followed this wise counsel, and if the mind, by stripping itself of the prejudices that so often blind it could make itself capable of envisaging the truth, we should avoid those extremes in consequence of which some weigh the merit of a work exclusively by its age and others, too indulgent toward the moderns, toward their friends, or perhaps toward themselves, neglect the talents with which they were born in order to wage war on the illustrious dead, bitterly magnifying the smallest faults that they find (or believe that they find) in them and setting aside those great beauties that the good taste, reason, and experience of several centuries have sanctioned—those same beauties that lie behind the success of their own works. Do we not every day see that the very features most striking in the works of the moderns are also those for which the masterpieces of Antiquity were admired? Common sense and reason belong to every century and every era, and there can only ever be one truth.

Is it not true that a painter who seeks to perfect himself in his art must take as his models the greatest ancient masters and study and imitate them each for their most distinguished elements, and always by the light of nature and reason?

Can you attain perfection in color, either by the specific imitation of objects in nature or by overall harmony, strength, sweetness, and suavity, without reference to the taste of Titian or Giorgione, to whose principles you remain consistent today, as you do to those of Correggio, if you seek to bring to your own works the relief and depth that one sees in the works of these great men?

You cannot draw correctly or attain elegance and purity in your draftsmanship without some resemblance to the drawing of Poussin, Domenichino, Raphael, and, above all, to that of antiquity.

The grand taste exhibited by this drawing will not be far from the tastes of the Carracci, Correggio, and Michelangelo.

Nobility, simplicity, variety of characters, subtlety and accuracy of expressions, and wise and sublime ideas will again bring to your mind the thinking of Poussin, Domenichino, and above all of the divine Raphael. If you want to be praised for your taste in drapery, it cannot be so very different from that of the same Raphael, or of Guido Reni or Correggio.

If you wish to impart grace to your works, you will sometimes bring to mind the manner of Correggio or Parmigianino, sometimes the regular beauty of Raphael and the touching charm of Guido.

For an understanding of chiaroscuro and of overall effect, you will bring to your work the scrutiny and judgment of Rubens, Van Dyck or Rembrandt.

In the same way, should you ever become famous for your composition or beauty of touch or any other of the elements of painting, you will not be so very different from some great master who preceded you, from whom you will have drawn your inspiration, and who will have shaped your taste.



regard for precision, means making nothing but sketches and producing nothing but dreams, the impression of which is lost when one no longer sees the work or even when one looks at it for too long. Combining these two elements—how difficult a task!—constitutes the sublime in sculpture.

Low Relief

Since low relief is a very interesting part of sculpture and since the ancients did not perhaps leave in their own reliefs sufficient examples of the many different ways that they can be composed, I am going to try out some ideas about this kind of work. We must first and foremost distinguish two kinds of relief, mid- and high relief, determine their different uses and demonstrate that, depending on the circumstances, either may be admissible.

In an architectural surface such as a panel or a pediment, elements that are not customarily pierced, a high relief in several planes whose foreground figures are entirely undercut would produce a disastrous effect because it would destroy the harmony of the architecture; the middle and background of this relief would imply and give the visual impression of a depth of recession where none should be. It would at least seem to penetrate the building. What is required in that case is a mid-relief with very few planes—a form of work that is difficult in terms of the understanding and fine gradations that constitute its harmony. This low relief has no other effect than that resulting from the architecture, to which it must be entirely subordinated. But there are places where high relief can be very advantageously deployed and where the planes and projections, far from producing disorder, do no more than add to the air of truth that any imitation of nature must present. The most obvious such places are altars or other pieces of architecture in which piercing is imaginable; they must also be of sufficiently great extent, since, in a large space, a low relief would lack all impact when seen from a distance. The appropriate place and size thus become like the opening of a theater in which a sculptor can imagine whatever depth he likes in order to impart to his scene all the action, play, and interest required of his art by the subject, although it must still honor the laws of reason, good taste, and precision. This is a form of work in which one can more easily discern the relationship of sculpture to painting and demonstrate that the principles drawn from nature by these two arts are absolutely the same. Let us, therefore, banish the idea of relief as a subaltern practice that, since it never dares to transgress the boundaries fixed by custom, places a barrier between the artist and *le génie*. But wherever the relief is found and whatever the degree of its projection, it must be harmonized with the architecture, while subject, composition, and draperies must be in keeping with its character. Thus the virile austerity of the Tuscan order would allow only simple subjects and compositions. Garments would be broad and there would be few folds. But Corinthian and composite orders require greater extent in composition and a certain lightness and play in the fabrics.

From these general ideas, I move to some particular observations.

Fig. 68.
Pierre Puget
(French, 1620–94).
Milo of Croton, 1682,
marble, 270 × 140
× 80 cm.
Paris, Musée du Louvre,
inv. M.R. 2075.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

This bibliography is intended to help the reader make sense of the lectures by presenting the context in which they were delivered. It is divided into five sections: The first lists key collections of lectures published during the lifetime of the Académie and after its demise. The next section presents selected critical studies of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. Then come the main texts on art published during the period when the lectures in our collection were being delivered and some studies on the theory of art in France. It seemed essential to include sources tabulating the artworks accessible in France during the period of the lectures; these can be found in the fourth section. The fifth section provides references for the authors of the lectures in this volume.

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