



Quatremere de Quincy and the instrumentality of the museum

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I

In this paper I want to explore some of the ways in which art lost the capacity to embody knowledge in late eighteenth century France with particular reference to the writings of the art critic, archaeologist and academician, Antoine Quatremère de Quincy. During the revolutionary wars of the late-1790s, prime examples of classical sculpture and renaissance painting were plundered by Napoléon Bonaparte and put on show in what is now the Musée du Louvre, then simply known as the 'Muséum'. During this period, France saw itself as the cradle of liberty and, on the basis that 'the fruits of genius are the patrimony of liberty', it claimed the right to plunder the best art that Europe had to offer.¹ The *Apollo Belvedere*, the *Laocoon*, the *Belvedere Torso*, Raphael's *Transfiguration*, Domenichino's *Last Communion of St. Jerome* and Caravaggio's *Deposition* - were all freed from what one critic described as the 'gaze of servitude'.²

For most art critics, this project was a demonstration of the pole position France held on the European cultural and military stage.³ For Quatremere, however, the translation or 'displacement' of works of art from one place to another stripped works of art of the original context that gave them meaning. In this paper I want to pose three questions. First, how, according to Quatremère, was the museum 'instrumental', what did it do to art and what was art like before the Muséum so effectively recast it? I also want to explore Quatremère's perception of how art got into the position where it could articulate nothing other than the conditions of its own inaccessibility. And by way of a conclusion, I want to examine the impact Quatremère's perception of the instrumentality of the museum has on our understanding of the epistemological foundations of modernist art? I would contend that when we struggle to find the epistemological base within art – the project that haunts this conference - we are not only responding to the institutionalisation of art with the University, but also responding to a modernist discourse that takes art's inaccessibility as its defining article of faith. Inscribed within Quatremère's critique of the Museum was a precocious critique of modernity's impulse to aestheticise art and with it a rearguard defence to ensure that, despite the incursions of the museum and the art market, art might still embody what Quatremère termed 'la connaissance humaine' and what we might term knowledge.

II

Quatremère's critique of the instrumentality of the museum first emerged in the *Lettres à Miranda sur le déplacement des monuments d'Art de l'Italie* published anonymously while he was in hiding in the summer of 1796.⁴ The tone of the *Lettres* was, in part, shaped by his conservative politics. A staunch opponent of the republican left, Quatremère's was imprisoned during the Terror of 1793 and two years later was involved in the abortive royalist uprising of 13 Vendémiaire in 1795. At one level, then, his insistence that art should be part of the context from which it emerged was an indirect attack on the foreign policy of Republic. But the *Lettres à Miranda* were more than a conservative tirade against republicanism. Throughout the seven *Lettres* were

the twin assertions that the substantive part of art was lost when it was 'displaced', and that the essentially capitalist conditions of artistic production, circulation and consumption in France in the late-eighteenth century were inimical to the well being of the arts.

Writing in the second *Lettre*, Quatremère argued that no one nation could appoint itself as custodian of art and literature; to do so was a 'perversion', a mark of strength but not a nation's cultural sensibilities.⁵ The arts were part of a common European patrimony, what Quatremère termed a 'Republic of arts and letters' maintained by a supra-national 'brotherhood of artists, writers and philosophers'.⁶ In order for the arts to retain their value – he constantly uses the term 'valoir' which has a meaning quite distinct from market value or 'prix' – Quatremère insisted that works had to be seen in the context in which they were first produced.⁷ While he applied this criterion to all art, he was particularly exercised by classical Greek culture and especially Roman art, the prime conduit through which Greek antiquity was known to the modern world.

Classical art, Quatremère argued, could only be fully understood in terms of what he variously described as a wider 'frame', a 'scaffold', an 'ensemble' or a 'base'.⁸ This contextualising structure included numerous formative components such as cultural conventions, physical and human geography and the rituals of social, religious and political life, climate, sunlight and soil.⁹ To strip the classical world of its art, thereby depriving it of its 'base', was, he argued, akin to stripping the newly constituted museum of natural history of its collections and sending out individual specimens to the provinces. Individually, the specimens were no more than a 'curiosity', taken together, however, they constituted a meaningful whole. In the third *Lettre*, Quatremère mentioned Francesco Morisoni's project to remove a sculpture by Phidias from the pediment of the Parthenon on the basis that he was freeing the sculpture from the clutches of barbarianism.¹⁰ On the eve of the period when enlightened Europe began its campaign to liberate Greece from Turkish occupation, Quatremère made the radical assertion that art was best left where it was – even in a cultural and political condition wholly inimical to its original spirit - because to move it was, again, to deprive it of its substance. Morisoni, he argued, had not only broken the statue in his attempt to move it but also 'broken' its connection with its defining context. As Quatremère pointed out, barbarianism had perfectly preserved the work for several centuries.¹¹

What, for Quatremère constituted this totality? Throughout the *Lettres*, he alludes to a condition in which the arts in the classical world existed in a state of social, aesthetic and cultural plenitude. Set in their original context, they retained what he variously termed a 'fecundity', a 'magic force'.¹² Writing in the *Considérations sur les arts de dessein en France*, a programme for French art education written in 1791, he explained some of the conditions necessary for this fecundity and some of the social rewards it brought to the classical world (and might possibly bring to France).¹³

The arts, he insisted, must be driven by a social purpose and took the example of art's evolution in Antiquity as a model. The moral purpose of art in the early ancient world was yoked to a teleological development of language. At its inception, Quatremère explained, writing was a no more than a crude sign made to represent an object. As language evolved, it took on the ability to represent 'simple ideas'.¹⁴ The next stage in this process was the invention of characters some of which, he noted, formed 'a privileged form of writing capable of expressing the highest conceptions'.¹⁵ With the invention of hieroglyphics, some characters took on both a visual and a quasi-divine function. 'After all', Quatremère asks 'what was painting and sculpture in ancient Egypt if nothing other than an imperfect form of writing?' The Greeks, in turn, had perfected this visual form of communication. They lived in a perfect climate in which the imaginative capacities were stimulated by the sun without being overheated, and functioned in a political system that was at once free but also recognised the importance of collective social responsibility towards the polis.¹⁶ Through the

application the 'beau idéal', an idealised form of representation took shape based on a vision in which the artist was able to discern an ideal – not only an aesthetic but also a moral, ethical, political and social ideal - through the informed selection of visible nature. 'This sentiment of beauty is nothing other than informed judgement', Quatremère explained, one that was contingent on the ability to be able to locate 'the aesthetic part' within its defining structure or frame.¹⁷

Most importantly for our purposes, this kind of art was part of a common patrimony. It was wholly legible to the community of citizens that used it and, as such, formed a conduit for the transmission of knowledge. As Quatremère explained 'to make monuments, statues and painting in those times was nothing other than to speak and write', but to speak and write with a purpose.¹⁸ Classical art was high-minded and socially useful. In a period in which the cognitive, the ethico-political and the aesthetic were unified, the arts sustained the operation of the polis. They reminded citizens of their place within society, the structure of social life and their often precarious relationship with the rest of the world. The arts were used in civic and religious rituals and were used to articulate the ethical concerns of the polis. During this period, Quatremère explained, artists effectively assumed the role of 'historians who served society with all of resources of the most eloquent language that had ever been seen.'¹⁹ Again, Quatremère's key concern was the thoroughgoing integration of each of these faculties into a substantive whole. As he explained, the arts were the 'dispenseurs de toutes les gloires, alliés à toutes les plaisirs, mêlés à tous les actes civils, politiques et religieux, ils s'incorporerent avec tous les besoins de l'ordre social'.²⁰

Greek art, then, contained a wholly legible set of historical, religious, political and moral values that, taken together, defined and sustained a perfect social order. In fact, the arts were so central to Greek society's operation and well being that they required no 'protection'. Throughout the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, there were numerous public debates about the extent to which the arts should be supported by the government or the market. To pose such a question, however, was, for Quatremère, a stark admission that the moment of social and aesthetic plenitude we spoke of earlier had long since passed.

Quatremère's conception of art's development, its flowering in antiquity, its decline during the middle-ages, its partial revival in the renaissance, and with it his anxiety about the role of the arts in a modern world were shared by a wide constituency of contemporary artists, writers and critics.²¹ The key point of dispute among the republic of arts and letters was, as Alex Potts has explained, not a choice between classicism and modernity, but the a dispute about the capacity of the modern world to emulate the ancients.²² For those on the republican left, Greek art flourished in a climate of political liberty. The climate of liberty brought about by the French Revolution signalled the chance to rival or even surpass the example of the ancients: hence art's proper home was now Paris. For conservatives like Quatremère, however, the modern world had departed so radically from the standards of Antiquity that it could only try to emulate classical art with the tragic knowledge that it would inevitably fail. Although Quatremère's conception of what art should be is singularly at odds with a modern(ist) paradigm, his explanation of art's demise at the turn of the eighteenth century is startlingly familiar.

Writing well over a hundred years before Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno respectively addressed the subjects of the instrumentality of the museum, specifically the auratic character of modern art and its commodification under capitalism,²³ Quatremère spoke of the way in which Raphael's works had been treated like reliquaries and, as such, had been devalued.²⁴ Every collector insisted on having a fragment of the 'true Raphael', he noted, in the same way that churches insisted on having a fragment of the true cross. The solution was to restore Raphael to his proper place and to remove the museum. Quatremère proposed that his easel paintings –

that part of Raphael's work that was especially vulnerable to commodification by the museum because their size lent themselves so well to de-contextualisation - be returned to Rome where they might be shown in their original context. To treat the works otherwise was to assert their 'prix' – their financial worth - at the expense of wider social, cultural and ethical 'valoir'. Quatremère was acutely attentive to the implications of the de-contextualisation on art. 'What', he asks, 'could be more contrary to the true spirit and enlightened appreciation of the arts than a fiscal theory that sees nothing other than objects of commerce in monuments of public instruction...' ²⁵ In the closing passages of the last *Lettre*, he offered a prescient insight into the eventual fate of 'mercantile art.' 'I ask of speculators in the political economy,' he writes, 'for whom will your artists, who oil the wheels of commerce with by producing portable works, function? Who is served by this privileged form of commerce without an outlet, this production without consumers?' ²⁶

III

The fears that underpinned Quatremère's objection to the fate of art under capitalism have much in common with many twentieth century critiques on the production and consumption of art under modernism. ²⁷ For Quatremère, 'commerce without outlet' and 'a production without consumers' were the clear corollary of an autonomous form of art. If this moral imperative is removed from the production of art, it is easy to see how it might lose the kinds of legibility Quatremère accorded it during Antiquity. In fact, we might see a loss of legibility not only as the defining characteristic of modernist art but also one of the principal characteristics of the modern museum.

Quatremère, however, got it slightly wrong. He thought that an art stripped of its substantive content would soon become preoccupied with matters of technique on the basis that facture had long been the subaltern partner of 'la partie morale' in French academic art education. ²⁸ Quatremère underestimated capitalism's insatiable need for art and the kinds of changes art would need to make in the logic of its own production in order to meet that need. 'La partie morale' was stripped from art but it was replaced not with technique, as Quatremère imagined, but with the fetishisation of the artist and an insistence on the autonomous nature of artistic production. As early as 1810, Parisian art dealers trading in portable pictures with no established provenance or recognised 'valoir', commodified their stock by publishing potted biographies that underscored the personal, physical and psychic integrity of the artist, and integrity refracted through the application of coarsely-encrusted paint that was read as a direct trace of the artist's person. ²⁹ Thus valorised, critics were able to assert that the worth of some pictures might be compared to another kind of abstracted value, 'banknotes'. Clearly, under such circumstances, the social utility of painting was non-existent; its financial and aesthetic worth was now totally subsumed within the subjectivity of its author. Thus, the proper home for this kind of painting was the abstracted space if not of the white cube then certainly its antecedent, the Museum, a consecrated arena for the valorisation but also the commodification of the creative self. The logical extension of this kind of practice was, as Bourdieu noted, Piero Manzoni placing tins of his own shit on pedestals and selling them for their weight in gold. ³⁰

This process of abstraction, the literal abstraction of a work from its context and its correlate, an aesthetic abstraction in which art (and the artists) may speak only about the process of its (his) internal operation, is familiar to us today. A cartoon published in the *New Yorker* in 1947 in which a group of connoisseurs admire the grid-like composition of what turns out to be to be a ventilator, a plot repeated in the London *Sketch* seven years later confirms the extent to which the loss of legibility – Quatremère's 'production without consumers' - has embedded itself within the public's expectations of art. For Quatremère, the space of the Museum signified the death of art; for the generations of modernists that followed him, it signified the only conditions under which it could continue to operate.

IV

Finding a space for 'knowledge' within a modernist paradigm is clearly difficult; the idea that artists share a 'common patrimony' other than the market in which they operate is hard to sustain. If modern art has been so preoccupied with the systematic denial of what Quatremère termed its 'rapports utiles', it is hard to see its epistemological base as anything other than an account of the marked absence of defining rules or operation. Indeed, highly compelling accounts of this absence have been given by Adorno, Bourdieu, Terry Eagleton and others. Compelling they may be, but they all ultimately rehearse the conditions of art's purposelessness. As Eagleton rather gloomily explains:

There would seem only one route open, and that is an art which rejects the aesthetic. An art against itself which confesses the impossibility of art... An art, in short, which will undo all this depressing history, which will go right back even before the beginning, before the dawning of the whole category of the aesthetic, and seek to override in its own way that moment at the birth of when the cognitive, ethico-political and libidinal-aesthetic became uncoupled from one another.³¹

There may well be other options, however, when we set out to explore the interstices of art and knowledge – two abstracted concepts that the Greeks would find hard to separate - it is important to consider, however, that many of the difficulties we encounter are essentially modern and are exacerbated by the unconstrained freedoms allowed in the sequestered spaces in which we locate the objects of our interrogation.

Endnotes

- ¹ L. Barbier, Quoted in A. McLellan, *Inventing the Louvre. art, politics, and the origins of the modern museum in eighteenth-century Paris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1994) p. 116.
- ² P. Rosenberg, 'Les vies de Denon', *Dominique-Vivant Denon: L'Oeil de Napoléon* (Paris: Réunion des Musées nationaux) p. 25.
- ³ A. Becq, *Genèse de l'esthétique française moderne: de la raison classique à l'imagination créatrice, 1680-1814* (Pisa. Pacini. 1984) pp. 743 ff.
- ⁴ A.-C. Quatremère de Quincy, *Lettres à Miranda sur le déplacement des monuments d'Art de l'Italie*, (Paris, An VI (1796)
- ⁵ *Deuxième Lettre*, p. 91.
- ⁶ *Premier Lettre*, p. 88.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ⁹ *Troisième Lettre*, p. 101.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 113.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- ¹² *Ibid.* p. 101.
- ¹³ A.-C. Quatremère de Quincy, *Considérations sur les arts de dessein en France*, Geneva: Slatkine, 1970). P. 13.

- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 15 A.-C. Quatremere de Quincy, *Considérations morales sur la destination des ouvrages de l'Art, ou de l'influence de leur emploi sur le génie et le gout* (Paris, 1815) p. 20.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 17 *Quatrième letter*, p. 113.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 21 For a summary of eighteenth century French art criticism, see A. Becq, *Genèse de l'esthétique française moderne: de la raison classique à l'imagination créatrice, 1680-1814*, and R. Wrigley, *The origins of French art criticism. from the Ancien régime to the Restoration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
- 22 A. Potts, *Flesh and the ideal. Winckelmann and the origins of art history* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994). Pp. 67-75.
- 23 D. S. Sherman, 'Quatremère/Benjamin/Marx: Art Museums, Aura and Commodity Fetishism', D. J. Sherman and I. Rogoff, *Museum Culture; Histories, Discourses Spectacles* (London: Routledge, 1994) pp. 123 ff.
- 24 A. C. Quatremère de Quincy, *Sixième Lettre*, 124.
- 25 *Septième Lettre*, 134.
- 26 *Ibid.* 135.
- 27 Conspicuous examples of such a critique include T. Adorno, P. Bourdieu, *The rules of art*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995) and *The field of cultural production. essays on art and literature*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993); T. Adorno, *Aesthetic theory* (London: Athlone Press, 1997); W. Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', *Illuminations* (London: Fontana. 1992).
- 28 A. Boime, *The Academy and French painting in the nineteenth century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986).
- 29 S. Adams, Signs of recovery: landscape painting and masculinity in nineteenth century France, S. Adams and A. Gruetzner Robins, (eds.) *Gendering landscape art*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) pp. 13-17.
- 30 P. Bourdieu, 'The market for symbolic goods', *The rules of art*, p.169.
- 31 T. Eagleton, *The ideology of the aesthetic*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) p. 370.