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Thomas Ferguson  
*College of DuPage*

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## Roger de Piles in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

by Thomas Ferguson

(Honors Art 212)

The Assignment: Students were assigned to write a paper critiquing the system of 18<sup>th</sup> century academic Roger de Piles, analyzing specific artists, determining its influence in this century, and identifying strengths and deficiencies of de Piles' system.

**B**ernard Picart's 1704 engraved portrait of Roger de Piles, French critic, academic, and failed painter, captures the pedantic nature of the man; de Piles seems aloof and refined as he poses with his hands daintily resting upon a book, his eyes resting on a place beyond the frame, beyond the viewer. Skliar-Piguet writes that by 1699, de Piles had "come to be recognized as one of the most eminent figures in the world of art," having been "appointed Conseiller Honoraire to the Académie Royale" (2). Skliar-Piguet points to the fact that de Piles is responsible for the academic division of artists into "schools," and true to form, chose an artist famous for documenting and distinguishing between various cultures. The framing of the piece, as a painting within an engraving, reflects on his career and small accomplishments as a painter himself.

De Piles' 1708 "*Balance des Peintres*" details and amasses a series of ratings for the great Italian artists; some ratings are similar to the same prejudices Art holds today, while others seem to adhere to a system either embryonic or archaic. De Piles rates the canon of European painters based on four categories: expression, composition, color, and drawing, assigning each category a point value, the maximum of which is ten. One of the more archaic judgments on the part of de Piles, in my estimation, is a zero awarded to Giovanni Bellini in the category of expression. Reading this raised my ire, and I prepared to arm myself in order to exonerate Bellini.

After racking myself for days plotting to destroy de Piles' system in reference to Bellini and his remarkable zero, I'd actually begun to understand de Piles' methodology. Given that posterity has not provided us with grades specific to the paintings themselves, only the painters, I began to compare the students with the teacher to attempt to elucidate de Piles. I surmise that as the grades in the case of Bellini/Giorgione/Titian do rise with the quality as the art is passed on and modified, there must be a guiding rhythm to his academic approach. To my surprise, this rhythm actually became resonant with me as I studied it.

Bellini's zero in the category of expression is inexcusable, especially in the greater context of Art at large. While he is not at the expressive level of da Vinci's lucid silverpoints (giving da Vinci fourteen points), one need only look at his *Entombment* to realize that Bellini is no expressive amateur. Yet Bellini is arguably weaker in this arena than his students, Giorgione and Titian, and receives a score in expression that is fitting relative to them (four and six points, respectively). It is difficult not to notice that Titian's ostensible student Tintoretto suffers the same fate under de Piles' hand as his artistic forbears. The problem, it would seem, is not so much that de Piles cannot recognize progress or quality, but is disparaging of the entire Venetian

school grown from Bellini.

Venice at this point does seem to be falling behind its contemporaries and compatriots. Gardner's reflects this sentiment, referring to Parmigianino as one who wields "exquisite grace and precious sweetness" (563), and refers to the Mannerists as a whole as "most often achiev[ing] the sophisticated elegance they sought in portraiture" (564). Gardner's reflection on Bellini elicits no comparable excitement in the realm of expression, even ascribing a painting's "feeling of serenity and spiritual calm" to "less from the figures... than from the harmonious and balanced presentation of *color* and light" (553). De Piles seems to reserve the category of expression for the human figure, while expression through color and light falls into that of color itself. This explains Carravaggio's similar marks; the paintings may be enough to bring a viewer to awe or tears, yet the faces, as in Bellini, are rather stoic and lack movement.

Bellini's school is thusly awarded consistently high marks in color, and rightly so. Gardner attributes to Bellini "an important role in developing the evocative use of color..." (552). Bellini's influence is also justifiably seen in the grading of his students; Giorgione and Titian both receive scores of eighteen points, "the highest attainable achievement" (36), according to Rosenberg. This trend can be seen as the inverse of da Vinci's grades, which are high in expression but abominably low in color. Da Vinci mastered the art of glowing, soft modeling, yet his colors often seem generally washed out. Da Vinci expresses through figures and movement while the Venetians express through color. Throughout Roger de Piles' *Balance des Peintres*, these two categories are nearly exclusive to one another; a gain in one is matched by a reduction in the other, as if past artists were forced to embrace one as if it were a polar opposite to the other. This is in contrast to the other pair of categories, composition and drawing, which are routinely matched within one or two points. Only de Piles' precious Rubens breaks out of this cycle with scores of seventeen and seventeen points in color and expression.

That Roger de Piles gradually acknowledges the Venetian school's ability in composition and drawing does not mean that Bellini's razing is over. Though he doubles his composition score through his student Giorgione and triples it through Titian, Bellini scores but a score of four, the lowest by two steps of any artist of the *"Peintres."* Like his score for expression, I find the score fitting when relative to the Venetian school he founded, yet exceedingly low when compared to contemporary artists of other regions. I believe that the same razor that de Piles applies to expression is used here. While Bellini's figures are excellent as representations of figurines or ornaments, they do not appear to be engaged in any type of situation relevant to reality. The trees, landscapes, and architecture of Bellini are surprisingly mimetic, showing a great overall compositional ability, yet what matters here is again the expressiveness of the composition. The composition of Carravaggio's figures again show relevance to a discussion of Bellini, Carravaggio receiving a similar grade, and his figures again look more like ceramic figurines than breathing people. The former's style is perhaps more corporeally realistic than Bellini's, but the placement of figures recalls pageantry vice poetry in both. As technically perfect as an artist could be, had he not communicated an enthusiasm through the work, he would not qualify in de Piles' system. Bernd Krysmanski relates a passage of de Piles' elaborating this, writing that "enthusiasm is a rapture that carries the soul above the sublime" (301).

Drawing and composition, we've established, generally carry similar grades in this system. Bellini is no exception, and because of the correlation between the two, I am forced to expect much of the same rationale behind a grade of six. I find it unfortunate that de Piles didn't allow for a category based solely on technical ability, for Bellini's open spaces, including his

clouds and trees and skies, are so delicate and brilliant that I'm sure such a category would have raised his stature considerably. The geometry and level of detail put into the cornices and arches of the *San Zaccaria Altarpiece* carries little expressive necessity, but is a welcome and needed part of the whole. It is evident, as with the other categories, that his students furthered and modified his skills, and is reflected in the grades. Yet I find that Bellini holds court over his student in the realm of these seemingly trivial details. Giorgione's backgrounds seem relatively flat and contrived, and Titian's abstracted and lacking in brilliance, but as their *figures* are technically and expressively more advanced than Bellini, de Piles embraces them.

My sole point of contention with de Piles' system is that it is far too based on the figural elements within the painting. True, de Piles furthers the appreciation of light and color, but it is always refracted through the factor of the human figures of the paintings. While landscapes were seen as one of the lowest types of acceptable art as defined by de Piles' predecessor Poussin, they still make for an integral part of the composition, one that I find neglected by de Piles.

De Piles' methodology serves a vital function today as something to rebel against. It is natural for man to place definitions on things, and de Piles served a function similar to the purging nature of the Iconoclasts in their many iterations. If one takes a Hegelian look at the nature of art, it is reasonable to see art movements as similar to epochs, each one rising from the former as the former has reached exhaustion. Indeed, the Renaissance and Mannerism can be read as responses to various purging/restrictive measures parallel to the Reformation/Counter-Reformation. Restrictions placed upon art by critics are no less caustic or necessary than those put in place by the church or state.

Postmodernism exists only because of the stresses of modernity as defined by the Bloomsbury Group, amongst others; Modernism, in turn, because of those stresses that fell the Victorian. I don't hesitate to hypothesize that the works of Poussin and his junior de Piles have directly affected the rebellions of Modernism and its issue as well. Rosenberg seems to echo this trait, if not outright suggesting that de Piles was aware of his role in the larger scheme of things, "He had to fight very hard indeed to effect even *one* breach in the closely defended classicistic wall of his day" (46-7). Rosenberg implies that de Piles is actually on the fresh side of the oscillation rather than the decaying one, and Alexandra Skliar-Piguet argues that "the talent and enthusiasm of de Piles were instrumental in preserving painting... in France from stagnation" (2). Whether an agent of renewal or of restriction, de Piles has arguably served a purpose for the betterment of Art.

There are those, however, who have fallen along the wayside due to de Piles' system. De Piles also can be equated with Arentino, "correcting" Michelangelo's Last Judgment, demanding him to "imitate Florence where David wears gilded leaves." If de Piles had won a battle in the recognition of fine color, those who fought for subtlety had lost. Della Francesca and Grunewald are two examples of artists tucked away neatly until 20<sup>th</sup> century resurrections, forgotten by anyone but the most diligent collector or historian. This is due in no small part to systems of qualification that do not account for the plasticity of art, or lack the foresight to see what these artists were anticipating. The artist must be qualified in order to remain in the canon, and within the canon, must be rated highly to remain relevant.

De Piles may have condemned some artists to obscurity, yet Art is still refreshed due to his grading and theorizing. Roger de Piles is among the first to standardize art, to measure its ebbs and flows, and helped to found a rival power to that of the artist: the critic. Just under two centuries later, Oscar Wilde captures the essence of what is to come for men like de Piles. Wilde's Gilbert answers his Ernest's question of the independence of criticism: "Yes;

independent. Criticism is no more to be judged by any low standard of imitation or resemblance than is the work of poet or sculptor. The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticizes as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought” (220-221). De Piles displays something like an anticipation of Wildean wit when he writes, “I like Raphael, I like Titian, I like Rubens... But whatever perfection they possess, I love Truth still better” (32). This Truth of de Piles, consummate academic, will continue to influence Art for years to come.

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