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Ernest Meissonier: Master In His Genre

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Introduction

HIS CAREER SPANNING MORE THAN FIFTY YEARS, FROM THE EARLY JULY Monarchy, through the Second Empire, into the first two decades of the Third Republic, Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier was one of the most highly regarded artists of the nineteenth century, both in France and internationally. When the fiftieth anniversary of his first Salon was honored in 1884, Queen Victoria loaned the painting that had been presented as a state gift in 1855. At his death in 1891 the issue of the popular weekly *L'Illustration* that reported on his state funeral at the Madeleine proclaimed him “the most renowned artist of our time, of the French school, of all schools.” The press published a letter formally conveying the grief and admiration of the German kaiser for “one of the great glories of France and the entire world.” Two years later, one reviewer of a memorial retrospective remarked, “Never has an artist enjoyed a superior or more widely extended celebrity.”¹

With his paintings of eighteenth-century gentlemen and seventeenth-century cavaliers, and later of Napoléon I and his troops, Meissonier had won medals at the Paris Salon since 1840, and Grand Medals of Honor at the Paris Expositions Universelles (Universal Expositions) of 1855, 1867, 1878, and 1889. He was awarded the Legion of Honor in 1846 and, steadily promoted, in 1889 became the first artist to achieve the highest rank of Grand Cross. Elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts (Academy of Fine Arts) in 1861, he was recognized by comparable bodies in Holland, Belgium, Germany, England, Spain, Italy, and the United States. After his death he was commemorated with two major Paris retrospectives: Tellingly, one was at his dealer's, the Galerie Georges Petit, the other at the École des Beaux-Arts (School of Fine Arts), despite his never having been its pupil. In 1895 a public monument was installed at the Louvre.²

Meissonier's stature, from the start of his career, made him a meaningful reference for contemporary novelists. In 1841 Balzac, already considering him representative of a certain level of wealth and taste, wrote him into “La Fausse Maîtresse,” published in the newspaper *Le Siècle*: “Dutch pictures like those Meissonnier [*sic*] remakes” adorned the luxurious boudoir of the comtesse Laginski.³ In *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) Jules Verne included Meissonier in the collection of thirty old and modern masters on Captain's Nemo's submarine, and

in *Money* (1891) Émile Zola placed him in the collection of the financier Daigremont.⁴ As late as 1920, Edith Wharton used him as a mark of great and suspect wealth, naming “the addition of a new Meissonnier [*sic*] . . . to his picture gallery” among the defiant extravagances of Beaufort, the rumored railroad speculator in *The Age of Innocence*.⁵

His celebrity, looking ahead to Picasso and Wyeth, prompted the attention of journalists, who provided an interested public with anecdotes about Meissonnier’s relationships with collectors, even events in his private life such as his remarriage. In the 1880s visitors to his custom-designed studio residences in Paris and suburban Poissy, such as Guy de Maupassant and columnist Albert Wolff, lionized him for the lengths to which he went to live amid as well as paint his fantasies, and made legendary his “prophet’s beard, unbelievable, a river, a stream, a Niagara of a beard.”⁶

Nevertheless, from the beginning Meissonnier’s significance was disputed and the recognition accorded him qualified. As critics such as Théophile Gautier and Charles Blanc wrote, respectively, he was a “master in his genre,” his work “had no equal in its genre.”⁷ His paintings were admired for their intimate scale, perfect rendering of tiny detail, and sensitive interpretations of mood and thought. Such works, however, fell into the genre of genre painting, that category featuring anonymous people engaged in unexceptional activities. They were accordingly attacked as a sign of the decay of serious art, formerly embodied by history, religious, and mythological painting, which idealized on the foundations of the classical tradition. With his military paintings Meissonnier did address subjects from history, but since in treating them he essentially applied genre attitudes, he in effect furthered the erosion of conservative standards. Moreover, as the novelists’ references confirm, Meissonnier’s popularity with Salon-goers and wealthy collectors who paid extraordinary sums for his paintings implicated him in both the vulgarization and commercialization of what had ostensibly been an elite and disinterested cult of the beautiful.

The ambivalence crystallized at Meissonnier’s death, when memorial accolades, while honoring his national stature, betrayed uncertainty about how to judge his achievement. Typically, the obituary in the *Gazette des beaux-arts* singled out as most memorable not aspects of his art but traits of his personality; reviewing the Petit retrospective, the journal assigned Meissonnier “a place apart.”⁸ Philippe Burty, Meissonnier’s most accurately informed biographer and critic, insisted that it would be unjust not to associate the artist with contemporaries like Delacroix, Rousseau, Millet, Courbet, and Daumier; yet he distinguished Meissonnier from them, concluding:

He doesn’t open to the imagination that “beyond” so beloved of spirits smitten with poetry; . . . he notes the essential conditions of reality with the science that has given to modern spirits a new pasture no less tempting than the dream.⁹

Burty raises a central factor in the decidedly negative treatment that prevailed after Meissonnier’s death: his divergence from the canon of modern art. As he lived

on, producing and exhibiting to the age of seventy-six, Meissonier stood in prominent contrast to newer currents. Incidents such as his notorious campaign to exclude Courbet from the Salon of 1872 (see Chapter 7) earned him the oppositional role of one “smashing the future in its egg and hurling it to the ground.”¹⁰

Artists and spokesmen appointed to the avant-garde provided quotable put-downs. Delacroix despaired romantically of his own immortality compared with that of his popular acquaintance: “After all, of us all, he is the surest to last.”¹¹ Baudelaire sniped at the “stupidity” of “boobies” who would pay for a Meissonier ten and twenty times what they would spend on a Delacroix.¹² Zola raged against the “perversion of popular taste” that prompted the public to shun the work of original but challenging artists, instead flocking to see tour-de-force human “insects.”¹³ Manet sneered of Meissonier’s meticulous execution in 1807, *Friedland*: “Everything is in iron, except the cuirasses [breastplates].”¹⁴ Degas, with malice and perhaps envy, cut Meissonier down as “the giant of the dwarfs,” at once alluding to the small scale of Meissonier’s work (and his physical height) and to his many negligible imitators.¹⁵ Toulouse-Lautrec gleefully featured Meissonier’s public humiliation in 1884 in his parody of Puvis de Chavannes’s *Sacred Wood* (see Chapter 9). Vollard recalled Meissonier’s dismissal of “Monet and all the gang of the young men,” such as Besnard, disparaged for painting “violet-coloured horses.”¹⁶ Finally, Dali facetiously baited the devotees of Cézanne, Matisse, and Pollock by lauding Meissonier’s “ultraregressive and subversive technique,” favorably comparing details in 1807, *Friedland* to an Action Painting.¹⁷

Subsequent defenders of modernism, in language at times amusing, at times vituperative, have cast Meissonier as the foil to progressive art. In a survey long used as a text, John Canaday, “madden[ed] to remember that while this mean-spirited, cantankerous, and vindictive little man was adulated, great painters were without money for paints and brushes,” pronounced that Meissonier’s “dry, pinched” paintings were analogous in their laborious execution to “a cathedral built from toothpicks.”¹⁸ For Hilton Kramer, Meissonier belongs among the “kitsch” examples of “benighted” academic taste whose “lugubrious disinterment” from the Metropolitan Museum’s storerooms, where they had “so justly . . . been gathering dust,” testifies to the “death of modernism.”¹⁹ Meissonier represents the polar opposite of the heroes of the canon: repetitiveness and sterility, rather than originality; craft and the literal imitation of material appearances, rather than nature viewed through a temperament, stylized, abstracted; modest and highly marketable, rather than defiantly public scale; refined and historicizing subjects, rather than the rude and the contemporary; the patronage of the rich, powerful, and conventional, rather than those congratulated for venturesome taste; and affirmation of politically conservative values like prosperity, militarism, and patriotism, rather than destabilizing analysis of social norms.

The pejorative characterizations are not without foundation; yet reviling or dismissing Meissonier perpetuates a limited understanding of both his production and

the development of nineteenth-century French art, as though we can learn only from artists who consciously or unconsciously critique and subvert dominant ideologies, rather than those like Meissonier who reinforce them. Instead of seizing on the words of Degas or Zola to justify neglect, it is more illuminating to follow the clues they give into the nature of Meissonier's work and his relationship to his public, into the factors other than formal self-consciousness that shape art.

The opposing camps did not function in isolation from each other. Manet, who like Daumier recast some of the same themes developed by Meissonier, in 1873 applied *Polichinelle* to caricaturing President MacMahon.²⁰ Degas not only shared Meissonier's keen interest in the photography of Muybridge, but admired his rendering of horses, copying them and their riders – including Meissonier himself, from *Solferino* – and then using two of his drawings in *Jockeys before the Grandstands* (ca. 1866–8, Paris, Musée d'Orsay).²¹ Georges Petit, who with his father oversaw Meissonier's market career, was the dealer whose willingness to take up Monet and Renoir in the 1880s would signal their growing acceptance.

Moreover, if in some respects Meissonier seems wholly disparate from avant-garde contemporaries, in others he appears to have shared common ground. Such supporters of Impressionist painters as Théodore Duret and Edmond Duranty responded positively to Meissonier's gift for depicting figures so that their nineteenth-century, "modern," and French, even Parisian, natures were undeniable, regardless of period costuming.²² Van Gogh appreciated Meissonier's psychological characterizations, requesting from his brother an etching after a *Reader* for his room in the hospital at St. Rémy, and writing raptly of *A Man Drawing* (a variant of Fig. 28):

There is a painting by Meissonier which I think beautiful: it is a figure viewed from behind, stooping over, with his feet on the rung of the easel, I think; one sees nothing but a pair of drawn-up knees, a back, a neck, and the back of a head, and just a glimpse of a fist with a pencil or something like it in it. But the fellow is there, and one feels the action of strained attention just as in a certain figure by Rembrandt, a little fellow reading, also bent over with his head leaning on his fist, and one feels at once that he is absolutely lost in his book.²³

Scholars and exhibition organizers, particularly those concerned with relationships between art and society, have acknowledged Meissonier's relevance to understanding nineteenth-century French art, citing in particular such images of contemporary history as *Remembrance of Civil War*, *The Siege of Paris*, and *The Ruins of the Tuileries*. More recently Marc Gotlieb has forcefully applied theoretical constructions such as belatedness and theatricality, arguing that Meissonier sought to use naturalist practices, such as direct work from the model, to reform a burdensome tradition that he both aspired to emulate and was convinced he had betrayed. However, even such considerations have been limited or compromised by reliance on dated nineteenth-century monographs.²⁴

Chief among these is Valéry C. O. Gréard's *Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier, ses souvenirs – ses entretiens*, published in 1897 and translated into English (also Italian). A substantial volume of lasting usefulness, it is nonetheless a problematic source. Gréard (1828–1904) was a government administrator active in the reform of primary, secondary, and vocational education, only peripherally a participant in the art world.²⁵ He seems to have written at the behest of Elisa Bezanson (1840–98), Meissonier's neighbor in Poissy, attentive friend from the later 1860s, and after 1889 the artist's second wife. At Meissonier's death, Mme Meissonier, contesting the two children from his first marriage for control of the estate, claimed a cache of her husband's personal papers (now lost). These contained some earlier correspondence and notes, which she supplemented with her recollections of remarks he had made to her. She used this material for the catalog entries on the works in the retrospective at the École des Beaux-Arts and then shared it with Gréard, who both summarized and paraphrased in his first sections and then quoted directly from the same material. He thus contributed little of his own research or thinking, except for incorporating the information from the Petit retrospective for his concluding *catalogue raisonné*.

Disclaiming any pretense of providing “a continuous biography, or a detailed appreciation of the master's work,” Gréard instead proffered the artist's “scattered musings.”²⁶ His account is incomplete and at points inaccurate, for example, regarding the *Solferino* and Panthéon projects. It reflects memories, opinions, and aspirations offered by Meissonier in the 1880s, when he was in his sixties and seventies, and is not a reliable guide to earlier attitudes and intentions. It is colored, too, by the adoration of the widow, who bequeathed what she inherited of Meissonier's work and studio furnishings to the Louvre with the request that a special room be set aside in his memory.²⁷

Also important is Gustave Larroumet's *Meissonier*, published in 1895, in the same volume as Burty's essential biography. Integrating Larroumet's obituary and review of the Petit retrospective, this book includes reproductions of many works and annotations of prices paid at the studio sale, as well as biographical and evaluative comments. Larroumet (1852–1903), elected to the Academy of Fine Arts in 1891, became its perpetual secretary in 1898. He knew Meissonier later in the artist's career, when he was serving as Director of Fine Arts (1888–91), and handled the last negotiations over Meissonier's Panthéon commission. Manifesting an officially respectful perspective, Larroumet introduced his subject in patriotic terms in his first paragraph and wrote defensively regarding Meissonier's handling of color, preference for historical rather than contemporary subjects, and small scale; his coverage of earlier events and circumstances reprises previous accounts.

One hundred years after the commemorative exhibitions and books of the 1890s, Meissonier still lacks the modern monograph that would provide the basis for informed interpretation and historical understanding. Only in 1993 did the Mu-

sée des Beaux-Arts in Lyons undertake a comprehensive reintroduction with the exhibition *Ernest Meissonier – Rétrospective*. What I present here owes much to my opportunity as curator to synthesize material I had previously published, along with additional research; to consult with other contributors to the catalog; and to see together a representative body of the artist's work. I subsequently benefited from the opening of a new body of Meissonier papers purchased by the Archives of the *Musées Nationaux* and the rediscovery of 1806, *Jena*.²⁸

My present narrative of Meissonier's relevance to the study of nineteenth-century French art sets the venerable-master accounts of Gréard and Larroumet and the dismissals of the modernists against more extensive documentation of circumstances attending the artist's career. Even in the narrower context of the art world, Meissonier must be reconceived. He has long been pigeonholed as an "academic" or "pompier," as the later nineteenth-century colleague of Adolphe-William Bouguereau, painter of mythological nudes and religious subjects. As such he is identified with the distribution of cultural power within a closed system of privilege. However, although Meissonier may be counted an academician by virtue of his election to the Academy of Fine Arts and his proud representation of that institution, and although his art does reinforce conservative values, the label is misleading. "Academic" in Meissonier's case is not synonymous with allegiance to the classical tradition on which the pedagogy of the *École des Beaux-Arts* was based.²⁹

To the contrary, Meissonier's elevation constituted a challenge to the established system. Rather than being a product of academic training, he was essentially self-taught, schooled through his study of Dutch and Flemish genre painting and, above all, through the practice of designing popular wood-engraved book illustrations in the 1830s and 1840s. From these sources he derived features that made his paintings appealing, but the limits of his experience would be reflected in academically gauche faults, especially involving proportions and the spatial integration of disparate sections, faults for which critics would chide him throughout his career and yet that he would never purge from his art. He never ceased being a genre painter in his approach, even to momentous historical and allegorical subjects. His official stature thus testifies to the extent to which the bastions of French tradition were quietly eroding from within, not simply being assaulted by persecuted rebels.

Notwithstanding his popular, official, and financial successes, Meissonier's career was that of an outsider. From his childhood and throughout his professional activity he was threatened with rejection and marginalization. His relationships to key authority figures and institutions were marked by disappointment, from his childhood contact with his father, to his most prestigious teacher Léon Cogniet, to leaders he might have served, like Napoléon III. Though he wrested admission from the Academy, his limited access to the classical traditions with which its prestige was associated made him a step-child. At the very end of his life his rivalry would culminate in his pushing through a schism in the community of artists and the founding of the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts*.

What Burty called Meissonier's "science" – the aesthetic of meticulously rendered and exhaustively documented detail, obsessively pursued through his collecting of military gear, interviewing of eyewitnesses, and studying of horses in movement – constitutes Meissonier's alternative to the classical tradition with its focus on the female nude. He invoked "Nature" and "The Truth," as he conscientiously observed them – eventually even embracing the revelations of Muybridge's photographs of horses – as counterauthorities to Greece and Rome, Raphael, Poussin, and David. Insecure, he declined to risk the disputable terrain of genius and of manifestly subjective interpretation, instead locating his integrity as an artist in seemingly unimpeachable professional standards and in personal conduct, including ardent patriotism.

The preceding paragraphs suggest a concern with a form of psychological motivation and a biographical approach that is reinforced by the chronological structure of this book and that, despite current theoretical objections to monographic writing, privileges the artist as source of meaning. Though I adopt the monograph as the most useful format for my documentation, however, my intent is not to romanticize, much less heroicize, Meissonier as the principal in what makes his case relevant and interesting. I argue that individual paintings are more engaging pictorially than is often granted, and that Meissonier addresses issues that have sometimes been treated as the exclusive province of more hallowed contemporaries – for example, painting outdoor subjects of bourgeois leisure. I do not insist, though, that he belongs in the canon or that the canon should be redefined to encompass his efforts, that he is a neglected genius on his own terms, differently original. What is noteworthy about Meissonier is that, with his less rebellious imagination and his journeyman standards of execution, he was indisputably one of the most eminent artists of his day. Why this was so says much about the relationship of art to nineteenth-century French society as well as about the conditions to which canonical artists also responded.

My discussion foregrounds factors in Meissonier's choices other than aesthetic issues and explores in terms of one individual some of the institutions on which scholars have recently focused – most important, the art market and the state-sponsored exhibition system. A sensational star at auctions, Meissonier was one of the most important artists involved in the development of the early modern commerce in art. His buyers, supplanting the state as the artist's economic mainstay, brought to the fore a type of collector still with us today, a type not only buying art for aesthetic enjoyment and to display wealth and claim the status of cultural refinement, but also alert to investment potential.

Equally crucial to Meissonier's success were the regular exhibitions in Paris where he addressed his primary audience: not other artists or an imagined historical judgment, but a public that was fundamentally bourgeois. The terms *bourgeois* and *middle class* encompass a range of economic levels, from the wealthiest bankers and industrialists, who at times succeeded in elevating themselves to the ranks

of the aristocracy, to the comfortable professionals, and then below them the urban commercial entrepreneurs and clerks, who might be distinguishable from the lower class largely by virtue of not performing manual labor. Contemporaries, however, assigned the bourgeois a distinct identity, glossing over differences. Shared traits were often discussed disparagingly as narrow self-interest and the worship of money, with the bourgeois "spirit" manifesting itself in materialism, even philistinism, in lesser cultural sophistication, and in a taste for novelty (but within cautious parameters, lacking real originality or independence). Taken for granted was an ideology of progress: A measure of the prosperity of the most fortunate might be attained by all citizens through education and self-improvement, hard work, and the cultivation of virtues like honesty, reasonableness, moderation, and discretion.

Meissonier's collectors came from the wealthy end of this spectrum, but his reputation also depended on popular success at the Salon, on viewers who crowded around his pictures and bought affordable photographic, etched, or wood-engraved reproductions. Their preferences are reflected in, as well as being guided by, the reviews of journalist-critics like Théophile Gautier, who played a key role in defining and publicizing the terms in which Meissonier was appreciated. Meissonier would always be keenly sensitive to his reviewers, adapting when they turned threatening and taking steps to manage his exposure.

His reviews, whether positive or negative, confirm Meissonier's identification with the middle class, as it advanced and then entrenched its interests through a succession of political régimes. His subjects throughout his career celebrated bourgeois behavior and values, grounded back in stable, pre-Revolutionary times. Alternatively, they recalled epochs of France's greatest military glory, primarily under Napoléon I, emphasizing not the dictator but the ordinary citizens who united in serving the nation. Meissonier's well-advertised techniques bespoke honesty and industry, a respect for the materially present. As his memorialists in 1891 recognized, even his conduct as an artist exemplified bourgeois virtues.

Gautier signaled central factors in Meissonier's career when he wrote in 1862:

It is a curious thing to say, à propos an artist whom success has attended since his beginnings, whose every fought-over work attains enormous prices, that he hasn't yet shown all his talent. But that's the case with Meissonier, whom the admiration of the public and of collectors has circumscribed in a sort of magic circle from which he seems unable to emerge.³⁰

He meant to flatter, alluding to the new potential revealed by Meissonier's turn from genre to battle subjects like *Solferino*. His words were prescient, however, for though seeming to lead a charmed existence, Meissonier, during his lifetime no less than posthumously, proved very much to be the prisoner of the determinants of his popularity.