

Daumier's Salon: A Human Comedy

Among Honoré Daumier's (1808-1879) encyclopedic representations of Parisian daily life produced for such periodicals as *La Caricature* and *Le Charivari*, the subject of the art world in 19th-century France stands out. Daumier was, after all, not only a chronicler of the Parisian art scene, but a participant as well. A prolific artist working in a variety of media—in addition to lithography, Daumier produced a vast number of paintings, drawings, and sculpture—Daumier was intimately familiar with the art, artists, and audience to whom he gravitated time and again in his caricatures.

This selection of lithographs situates Daumier's observations of the art world within the context of the annual Salons, the exhibitions in which art and its producers, consumers, and critics were brought together. Spanning almost 25 years of his career, these lithographs not only showcase Daumier's attitudes toward the exhibition, valuation, and commercialization of art, but also reveal his knowledge of contemporary art practice and the history of art.

Labels:

Honoré Daumier

Le Bourgeois au Salon

Published in *La Caricature* on April 17, 1842

Gift of Helen and Hilton Goss, 1981.38.2

*The bourgeois at the Salon. Let's see here... what is this?... (reading in his brochure) "N° 387, Portrait of Mr. B.*** Stockbroker"... well, fancy that!... Oh, how stupid of me... the portrait of Mr. B*** is 386. This one is the portrait of a bull by Mr. Brascassat... I was about to say that...this idea of being painted with such big horns... after that these stockbrokers will do anything.*

Under the September Laws of the July Monarchy (1830-1848) that heavily censored the visual press, the Salon was a seemingly neutral and censorship-free subject. Instead of pinpointing the incompetency of specific political figures, Daumier incisively and comically captures the ignorance of the bourgeoisie in general, offering a humorous mirror for the middle-class, republican readers of *La Caricature* and *Le Charivari*. In this hand-colored lithograph, Daumier lampoons the Salon goer's reliance on the official Salon pamphlet, rather than his own eyes, for information about the works on display.

Honoré Daumier

Un jour où l'on ne paye pas

Published in *Le Charivari* on May 17, 1852

Gift of Robert M. Light, 2010.51.991

A day of free admission. 25°C (77°F) of heat!

As the official art exhibition of the French Academy—first held in 1667 in the Louvre’s Salon Carré—the Salon was the most prestigious art event, and attracted thousands of people from Paris and beyond. To accommodate all visitors, days of reduced or free admission were offered. Daumier expertly captures the physical space of the swarming crowd, while also remarking on the disorienting nature of the Salon installation. Tilted back, the woman in the center appears on the verge of fainting, overwhelmed by the crush of bodies and the looming walls, packed with paintings from floor to ceiling.

Honoré Daumier

Dis donc, not' homme, faut-y...

Published in *Le Charivari* on May 16, 1852

Gift of Robert M. Light, 2010.51.990

I say, my man, one must have strange ideas to have one's portrait taken like this!

The jury for the annual Salon was divided by medium, and each group consisted of members appointed by the Academy and members elected by the artists themselves. One of the appointed jury members for “Sculptures, Engravings, and Medallions,” archaeologist and amateur painter Count de Crissé Lancelot Turpin (1789-1859), is recognizable standing in front of a sensuous female nude. The humor of the scene exists in the juxtaposition between the upper-class jury member considering the work’s aesthetic (and probably erotic) qualities and the working-class woman who naively mistakes the nude with portraiture.

Pictorial quotations are a hallmark of Daumier’s oeuvre. The sculpture in this caricature is a parody of works by the neoclassical sculptor James Pradier (1792-1852), whose numerous female nudes with sashaying hips were a staple at the Salon.



James Pradier (Swiss, active in France, 1790-1852). *The Three Graces*, 1831 (modeled in plaster, 1825). Marble.

Honoré Daumier

Une Visite au Salon

Published in *Le Charivari* on March 28, 1847

Gift of Robert M. Light, 2010.51.603

A visit to the Salon. Obviously all the sculptors are a naughty bunch.

This lithograph emphasizes spectator ineptitude and the confusion of art and life. Rather than considering the sculptures reminiscent of the nude heroes of Classical Greece and Rome, a disgruntled bourgeois father scoffs at the works on display, commenting on their indecency. As if afraid of offending his children's modesty, the prudish father purposely pulls them past, averting his own gaze. Nevertheless, his two children hold back, curiously looking toward the works being admired with interest by many viewers.

Honoré Daumier

Viens donc..., mon ami, je ne trouve pas...

Published in *Le Charivari* on June 21, 1859

Gift of Robert M. Light, 2010.51.1422

- *Come along dear, I really don't think this is a pretty picture!*
- *No, from a pharmacological point of view, it interests me greatly... The pictures seem to suggest the testing of a new medicine... I must check what the exhibition catalogue says.*

Glancing over his pince-nez, a Salon visitor looks at a painting showing a little Cupid displaying an uncomfortable expression, as if needing to visit a bathroom. Though the wife is uninterested, the husband postulates that this painting must be about a new medicine, a laxative perhaps, and checks his Salon pamphlet for confirmation.

Not just ridiculing the bourgeois public, Daumier is here also ridiculing the popularity of bourgeois painting. This painting satirized in Daumier's lithograph comes straight from a work actually exhibited at the Salon of 1859, Jean-Louis Hamon's (1821-1874) *L'Amour en Visite*.



Jean-Louis Hamon (French, 1821-1874), *Cupid Visiting*, 1859. Oil on canvas.

Honoré Daumier

Laisse-moi regarder encore...papa !...

Published in *Le Charivari* on May 29, 1852

Gift of Robert M. Light, 2010.51.993

- *Please Papa, let me look again.... I am so sorry for poor Count Egmont's pain!*
- *You'd better feel sorry for your unfortunate father, who is breaking his arms, holding you up in the air like that.*

The painting *The Last Regards to the Remains of Counts Egmont and Hoorne*, depicting the decapitated heads of two 16th-century Flemish heroes by Belgian painter Louis Gallait (1810-1887), caused a sensation at the Salon of 1852. Though critics considered the work technically faultless, it was generally felt to lack greatness. Here Daumier highlights the excitement of a boy begging to be held above the crowds in order to view the gruesome scene, while not-so-subtly giving his opinion of the work: grisly sensationalism fit for children to enjoy.



Louis Gallait (Belgian, 1810-1887). *The Last Regards to the Remains of Counts Egmont and Hoorne*, 1852. Oil on canvas.

Honoré Daumier

Un Vritable Amateur

Published in *Le Charivari* on May 16, 1847

Gift of Robert M. Light, 2010.51.590

A true art lover.

The amateur was someone, typically from the upper class, who was interested in the history of art and aesthetics, familiar with the practice of painting, and who was often also a collector or critic. However, the amateur was also derided, most notably by the celebrated critic, Denis Diderot (1713-1784), in his Salon review of 1767, for erroneously determining artists' reputations and for disturbing artists with their misguided counsel. Here Daumier mocks the pretension of the portly amateur who, depicted with his magnifying glass—a tool of the trade necessary to detect signatures—seems more interested in who made the painting and not the painting itself.

Honoré Daumier

Aspect du Salon le jour de l'ouverture...

Published in *Le Charivari* on June 22, 1857

SBMA, 2010.51.1319

The Salon on opening day - only the true connoisseurs, sixty thousand of them.

In this print, Daumier derides the pretensions of the ubiquitous Salon amateur. Boxed out from viewing a painting, a man (perhaps an artist or an enlightened viewer) casts a disdainful look on

the two gesticulating “connoisseurs.” Behind him, another self-designated “expert” consults his Salon pamphlet, necessary to form his “opinion.”

By contrast, Daumier’s paintings and watercolors of similar subjects focusing on the amateur have no hint of mockery. Instead, the true art-lover is sympathetically shown in absorptive states of viewing in print shops, galleries, and studios. Through this dichotomy, Daumier reveals his feelings toward the commercialization of the Salons in contrast to spaces that actually facilitate aesthetic discourse and innovative art making.



Honoré Daumier, *The Print Collector*, ca. 1860-62, oil on canvas.

Honoré Daumier

Il n'y a pas à dire, c'est bien moi...

Published in *Le Journal Amusant* on June 18, 1864

Gift of Robert M. Light, 2010.51.1500

No doubt, it's me! However I am very disappointed that the artist insisted on portraying me without my glasses and collar.

The figure that stands before his sculpted portrait is a fictional character, Monsieur Joseph Prudhomme, created by fellow caricaturist Henri Monnier (1799-1877). Prudhomme appears sporadically in Daumier’s lithographs as an impersonation of the complacent bourgeois. In caricaturizing both the sitter and the formulaic bust, Daumier ridicules the popularity of portraiture as a mode of self-glorification. Through Prudhomme’s critique of the portrait, Daumier also remarks upon the vanity of the bourgeoisie in attempting to exert control over the process of artistic production.

Honoré Daumier

Comment, c'est dans cette cave que...

Published in *Le Charivari* on July 2, 1857

Gift of Robert M. Light, 2010.51.1320

What do you mean the sculptures are in the cellar? In that case I won't be seeing them.... I am afraid of rats!

Within the Academy, painting occupied a prestigious place in the hierarchical ranking of media, and was therefore accorded pride of place in the Salon. In contrast, sculpture was frequently given inadequate space for display, and therefore went generally unnoticed by the public. In this lithograph, the Salon-goers lean over a cage-like opening in order to glimpse the works below. However, they are reluctant to go further: not only are the sculptures in a cellar full of rats, Daumier depicts no access point from which to descend.

Honoré Daumier

Le peintre qui a eu un tableau refusé...

Published in *Le Charivari* on April 27, 1859

Gift of Robert M. Light, 2010.51.1421

The artist whose painting has been rejected by the jury.

The Artist: - Sir, don't you think this is a horrible picture.... can you understand why the Jury has accepted such junk?

The Gentleman: - But I think the artist who did the painting has great talent! It's charming!

The Artist: - I see, Sir, that you must be a friend of the painter's... maybe you even posed for the painting!

During the 1850s, the Salons became more and more conservative, frequently rejecting over half of the submitted entries. This was particularly the case with those artists—including Daumier's friends Camille Corot (1796-1875), Jean-François Millet (1814-1875), Charles-François Daubigny (1817-1878), and even Daumier himself—whose work was often considered crude, unfinished, or went against the grain of the Academy and thus did not pass the test of the “expert” judges. In Daumier's lithograph, the artist accuses the gentleman that accepts average Academic painting instead of that which experiments with new techniques and themes.

Honoré Daumier

Quelle société abâtardie et corrompue...

Published in *Le Charivari* on June 8, 1865

Gift of Robert M. Light, 2010.51.1535

Just look what a degenerated and corrupt world we are living in.... all these people just look at more or less monstrous paintings... not one of them stops in front of a painting depicting the beauty and purity of nature!

Daumier was close friends with many of the Barbizon painters, whose unconventional landscapes were given a lukewarm reception at the Salon. Thus, the artist gesturing desperately toward a landscape of poplars while passionately addressing the viewer seems not only earnest but even self-referential. Daumier's allegiance to artists outside the Academy is evident in his participation in independent exhibitions and petitions calling for the elimination of conservative Salon juries who often refrained from exhibiting the “minor” arts of landscape and genre painting.