

THE SALON OF 1767

addressed to my dear friend Monsieur Grimm¹

DON'T EXPECT ME, my dear friend, to be as rich, various, wise, mad, and fertile this time as I've been in previous Salons. Exhaustion is setting in. Artists can alter their compositions infinitely: but the rules of art, its principles and their application, will remain limited. Perhaps with the acquisition of additional knowledge, of additional help, through selection of an original format, I might succeed in instilling some charm and interest in such familiar material: but I've learned nothing; I've lost Falconet,² and originality of form depends on a moment of inspiration that has yet to arrive. Imagine that I've returned from a voyage to Italy, with my imagination full of the masterpieces of ancient and modern painting produced in that country. Arrange for me to become familiar with works of the Flemish and French schools. Obtain from the wealthy individuals destined to read my notes an order or authorization to have sketches executed of all the works I'll be discussing with them; and I'll respond with a Salon that is totally new. As for the best-known

¹ Friedrich Melchior, known as Baron Grimm (1723–1807). Close friend of Diderot's and editor of the *Correspondance littéraire*, for which Diderot wrote his Salons. See introduction.

² Étienne-Maurice Falconet (1716–91). French sculptor, student of his uncle Nicolas Guillaume and Jean-Baptiste II Lemoyne. Falconet wrote the article "Sculpture" in the *Encyclopédie*. He and Diderot were close; Diderot here laments his friend's departure for Saint Petersburg (September 12, 1766), where he was to remain until 1778. The two men left a record of their friendship in a celebrated epistolary debate over the role of posterity in the psychology and ethics of artistic creation (see the summary bibliography).

artists of centuries past, I'd discuss the treatment and handling of a modern artist in light of the handling and treatment of an older one analogous to his own; and you'd immediately obtain a more precise idea of color, style, and lighting. If there were a composition, incidents, a figure, a head, a character, an expression borrowed from the Carracci, from Titian, or from another source, I'd recognize the plagiarism and denounce it to you. A sketch, I don't say a vivid, intelligent one, though this would be better, but a simple rough sketch, would suffice to indicate for us the general disposition, effects of light and shadow, position of the figures, their action, massing, groupings, the line of liaison³ that winds among and links the different parts of the composition; while reading my description you'd have such a simple sketch in front of your eyes; it would spare me many words; and you'd understand me better. We could resort once more to the immense print portfolios which our friend Baron Holbach⁴ keeps in his attic, there abandoned to the rats, and flip through them: but what is a print in comparison with a painting? Has one encountered Virgil, Homer, if one has read Desfontaines⁵ or Bitaubé?⁶ As for this Italian trip which has so often been contemplated, it will never become reality. Never, my friend, will we embrace each other in that ancient abode, silent and sacred, where men have come countless times to confess their errors or plead their needs, under this Pantheon, under these dark vaults where our souls were to have unburdened themselves without reserve, and poured forth all their innermost thoughts, all their secret feelings, all their concealed actions, all their hidden pleasures, all their wasted efforts, all those mysteries of our lives which scrupulous decency forbade us to confide to even our most intimate, most open friends. So, my friend, it seems we'll die without having known each other completely; and you will not have obtained from me the full justice which you deserve. But be consoled; I would have been frank, and would perhaps have lost as much as you would have gained. There are many parts of my nature which I'd be afraid of exposing to view.

3 *Ligne de liaison*: a translation of the Italian phrase "linea serpentinata," as defined by Lomazzo; Diderot learned of it from Hogarth, who in his *Analysis of Beauty* (1753) rendered it as the "line of beauty" and "the serpentine line." The phrase recurs in the entries on Vien and Doyen, below. See E.M. Bukdahl, *Diderot, Critique d'Art*, vol. II, 1982, pp. 94-7.

4 Paul-Henri Dietrich, known as Baron Holbach (1723-89). French writer and philosopher; a close friend of Diderot's. He is perhaps best known for his materialist *Système de la nature* (1770), which was condemned by the Sorbonne.

5 P.-F. Desfontaines (1685-1745). French writer, historian, and translator (*Works of Virgil*, 4 vols., 1743).

6 Paul-Jérémie Bitaubé (1732-1808). He published French prose translations of the *Iliad* (1764) and the *Odyssey* (1785).

Be consoled yet again; for it is sweeter to esteem a friend greatly than to be greatly esteemed by him. Another reason for the poverty of this Salon is that several artists of reputation did not contribute to it, and others whose good and bad qualities would have occasioned a harvest of observations from me are also not exhibiting this year. There is nothing there by Pierre,⁷ nor by Boucher,⁸ nor by La Tour,⁹ nor by Bachelier,¹⁰ nor by Greuze.¹¹ They have maintained that they were tired of exposing themselves to stupid beasts only to be ripped to shreds. What, Monsieur Boucher, you to whom, as First Painter to the King, the progress and longevity of art should be particularly dear, is it precisely at the moment of obtaining this title that you deliver a first blow to one of our most useful institutions,

7 Jean-Baptiste-Marie Pierre (1714-89). History painter; student of Natoire and J.-F. de Troy. Accorded provisional membership in the Royal Academy on April 8, 1741; received as a full academician on March 31, 1742. He was appointed First Painter to the King in 1770, but he painted very little after 1763, devoting his energies instead to his burgeoning administrative duties.

8 François Boucher (1703-70). Student of the engraver J.-F. Cars and François Lemoyne. Granted provisional membership in the Royal Academy on November 24, 1731; received as a full academician on January 30, 1734. Named First Painter to the King in 1765. He became fashionable very soon after his return from Italy (1731), his fluent handling and erotic imagery being in perfect accord with the tastes of his contemporaries, and he remained in demand until his death. His production was immense and varied, including theatrical decorations and tapestry cartoons. The favorite painter of Madame de Pompadour, his fashionable clientele was large. Diderot saw him as a cautionary example of the nefarious effect of declining moral standards on contemporary cultural production.

9 Maurice-Quentin de La Tour (1704-88). Pastel portraitist; student of J.-J. Spoeede and C. Dupouch (obscure painters in the Academy of Saint Luke). Granted provisional membership in the Royal Academy on May 27, 1737; received as a full academician on September 24, 1746.

10 Jean-Jacques Bachelier (1724-1806). Diderot is mistaken, as Bachelier did show in the 1767 Salon (see below, no. 37). This was to be his last exhibition, however, and Diderot's inclusion of him in this list may be the result of his having heard of the artist's intention to refrain from submitting works in future.

11 Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805). Student of C. Grandon (an obscure Lyonnais artist). Granted provisional acceptance in the Royal Academy on June 28, 1755 (as a genre painter); received as a full academician on July 23, 1769 (as a genre painter). Diderot was fascinated by Greuze's work, particularly his project to fuse the gravity and high ambition of history painting with the contemporary immediacy of genre imagery. While they were friends, relations between the two men were complex—Greuze was a difficult man—and they had a spectacular falling out while Greuze was preparing his (abortive) attempt to have himself accepted by the academy as a history painter rather than a genre painter with his *Septimus Severus* (1769). In the wake of this humiliation Greuze refused to exhibit at the Salon and kept somewhat aloof from the institution that had rebuffed him.

and this from fear of hearing difficult truths? You have not considered the possible effects of your example! If the great masters withhold their works, lesser lights will do likewise, if only to give themselves the air of great masters; soon the walls of the Louvre will be completely bare, or will be covered only with the daubs of frivolous rascals, who would show only because they had nothing to lose from such visibility; and this annual and public artists' battle thus being extinguished, art would quickly fall into decadence. But to this consideration, the most important one, should be appended another that's not to be overlooked. Most of the wealthy men who spend money on great masters reason to themselves as follows: Any sum spent by myself on drawings by Boucher, on paintings by Vernet, Casanova, or Loucherbourg¹² is invested at very high interest. I'll enjoy looking at an excellent work for my entire life. The artist will die; and I or my children will obtain for this work an amount twenty times greater than its initial price. And such reasoning is quite justified; and the heirs see the riches they covet used in this way without regret. Much more was obtained by the sale of the collection of Monsieur de Julienne¹³ than it had originally cost. At present I have before me a landscape which Vernet made at Rome in exchange for a jacket, vest, and trousers, and which has just been purchased for one thousand écus. What is the correspondence between the old masters' earnings and the value we assign their works? They provided, in exchange for a piece of bread, compositions which we vainly propose to cover with gold. A dealer will not cede a painting by Correggio even for a sack of money ten times heavier than the sack of half-farthings for which an infamous cardinal obliged him to die.¹⁴

But where does all this bring us, you say to me? What have the story of Correggio and the sale of Monsieur Julienne's pictures in common with public exhibition and the Salon? I'll tell you. The skilled man of whom a rich one requests a work he can leave to his son or heir as a precious inheritance will no longer be subjected to my judgment, or yours, or considerations of self-esteem, or fear of losing his reputation: it is no longer for the nation but for a private individual that he will produce, and a mediocre work of no value

12 Notes on artists who exhibited work in the 1767 Salon (as did these three painters) are to be found below, where Diderot assesses their submissions.

13 Jean de Julienne (1686–1766). His large collection was sold in Paris March 30–May 22, 1767.

14 Correggio died in 1534. Upon receiving his rather meagre payment for the dome of the Cathedral in Parma, which he had frescoed, the artist set out for Correggio, where the money was needed by his family to settle outstanding debts. It was full summer; he seems to have drunk some contaminated water along the way, for on reaching home he fell ill with fever and soon died.

will be obtained from him in this way. It's impossible to raise too many barriers against laziness, mediocrity, and deceit; and public censure is among the most powerful of these. The locksmith with wife and children, who had neither clothing nor bread to give them and who could not be convinced to do a botched job however high the fee, would be a rare enthusiast indeed. Therefore I would like Monsieur the Director of the Academy to obtain an order from the king enjoining, under pain of exclusion, all artists to send at least two works to the Salon, painters two pictures and sculptors one statue or two models. But these people who scoff at the glory of the nation, at the progress and longevity of art, and at the instruction and entertainment of the public do not perceive where their own best interests lay. How many pictures would have remained for years at a time in the obscurity of the studio if they'd never been exhibited? An individual goes to see the Salon, and in the midst of his aimlessness and boredom he discovers or realizes he has a taste for painting. Yet another who possesses this taste, and who comes only to pass an amusing quarter-hour, finds himself spending a sum of two thousand écus. And in an instant an artist of mediocre reputation can become known as a skillful man. It was there that the beautiful dog by Oudry¹⁵ which now decorates the right wall of our synagogue awaited our friend the baron¹⁶ (Pl. 2). Before him, no one had given it a second look; no one had sensed its merit, and this saddened the artist. But, my friend, let's not be less than honest in the present account. This is worth much more than the criticism or praise of a painting. The baron sees this dog, buys it, and immediately all the disdainful amateurs are furious and jealous. Others come; they pester him, they propose to buy the painting from him at twice the price he paid. The baron seeks out the artist and offers to sell his dog back to him so that he might take advantage of these offers. No, Monsieur, no, the artist tells him. I am too happy that my finest work belongs to a man who understands its value. I do not consent. I will accept nothing more; and my dog will remain in your hands.

Ah! my friend, the cursed race which is that of amateurs! I must explain my meaning and take comfort, for I have reason to do so. It is beginning to become extinct here, where it has lasted all too

15 Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1686–1743). Student of his father Jacques Oudry (member of the Academy of Saint Luke), then of M. Serres and Largillière. Admitted to the Academy of Saint Luke in 1708. Granted provisional membership in the Royal Academy on June 26, 1717; received as a full academicien September 25, 1719 (as a history painter). The work in question is *Bitch Hound Nursing her Pups* (1752; Paris, Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature).

16 Baron Holbach. "Our synagogue" refers to his home, where Diderot and other members of their circle frequently gathered.

long and done too much harm. It is these people who determine, erroneously and capriciously, an artist's reputation; who set out to make Greuze die from pain and hunger; who possess entire galleries which have cost them virtually nothing; intelligence or rather pretensions which have cost them nothing; who mediate between wealthy men and indigent artists; who demand payment for the protection they accord talented individuals; who open or close their doors to them; who exploit their need for them to pass time in their company; who exact gifts from them; who finagle their best works from them for derisory prices; who lie in wait, ready to ambush them from behind their easels; who secretly condemn them for their mendacity, but in fact keep them enslaved and dependent; who endlessly preach the desirability of limited financial resources as a necessary spur to the artist and the man of letters, for once fortune is joined with talent and intelligence, they will no longer be any use; who decry and ruin painters and sculptors who dare express disdain for their protection or advice; who annoy and disturb them in their studios, by their importunity and the ineptitude of their counsel; who discourage them, who destroy them, and who rein them in, as they cruelly dispose of the power to sacrifice their genius, or their prospects, or their fortunes. I myself, who now speak to you, once heard one of these men, his back turned to an artist's fireplace, impudently condemn him, he and his kind, to work and indigence, and then, with the falsest compassion, attempt to atone for these crude remarks by promising charity to the children of any artist who might listen to him. I said nothing and will reproach myself for my silence and my patience for the rest of my life. This disadvantage alone would suffice to hasten the decadence of art, above all if one considers that the tenacity of these amateurs occasionally goes so far as to obtain for mediocre artists the profit and honor of public commissions. But how can talent resist and art be preserved, given that, in addition to this verminous epidemic, a multitude of subjects are lost to arts and letters through the appropriate repugnance of parents before the prospect of abandoning their children to a profession that would threaten them with poverty? Art requires a certain education; and it is only poor citizens, those practically without financial resources and completely lacking in prospects, who allow their children to begin to draw. Our greatest artists emerged out of the basest circumstances. The cries of respectable families, when a child carried away by his inclinations begins to draw or write poetry, must be taken seriously. Ask any father whose son is pursuing either of these eccentric endeavors: "What is your son doing?" "What's he doing? He's lost; he draws, he writes poetry." Don't forget another of the obstacles to the progress and continued health of the fine arts, not the riches of a people, but rather this luxury which degrades

great talents, by obliging them to execute small works and to reduce great subjects to decorative sketches; and should you need convincing, look at the figures of Truth, Virtue, Justice, and Religion as rendered suitable for a financier's bedroom by Lagrenée.¹⁷ Add to these causes the depravity of morals, this unbridled taste for universal gallantry which tolerates only pictures of vice, and which would condemn a modern artist to beggary, should he be surrounded by a hundred masterpieces after subjects taken from Greek or Roman history. He'd be told: Yes, that's beautiful, but it's sad; a man holding his hand in a burning brazier,¹⁸ flesh eating flesh, blood which induces disgust: Oh my, that's horrifying; who wants to look at that? However, these same individuals speak often of nature the beautiful; and these people who talk incessantly of imitation of nature the beautiful believe in good faith that such a nature the beautiful exists, that it is present, that one can see it when one wishes, and that one has only to copy it. If you suggested to them that this is a completely ideal entity, they would open wide their eyes and laugh at you through their noses; and these last would perhaps be artists more foolish than the first, because their understanding would be no greater but they would put on knowing looks.

You should, my friend, compare me to those undisciplined hunting dogs who run indiscriminately after whatever game flies up before them; but as the subject has been raised, I must pursue it and consult one of our most enlightened artists about it.¹⁹ This ironic artist turns up his nose when I broach matters of the technique of his craft, as will be seen in a moment; but if he contradicts me, in the matter of the ideals of his art, I will have obtained my revenge. I would ask this artist —If you'd selected as a model the most beautiful woman known to you, and had rendered with the utmost care all her facial charms, would you think you'd represented beauty? If you answer me positively, the youngest of your students will refute you, and tell you that you'd produced a portrait. But if there's a portrait of a face, then there's a portrait of an eye, there's a portrait of a neck, of a throat, of a stomach, of a foot, of a hand, of a big toe, of a fingernail, for what is a portrait if not the depiction of a being in all its individuality? And if you do not recognize

17 See below, nos. 19, 20, 22, and 25.

18 Reference to a story recounted by Livy: Caius Mucius Scaevola, a young Roman, offered to infiltrate the camp of the Etruscans besieging Rome and kill their king Porsenna. He assassinated the wrong man; on being taken prisoner, he held the hand that had mistaken its mark over a fire. The subject was not unusual in Baroque painting.

19 Probably Falconet.

the portrait of the fingernail as rapidly, as confidently, and as unmistakably as the portrait of the face, this isn't because it doesn't exist, but because you've studied it less; because there is less of it; because its individualizing marks are smaller, more trifling and more fugitive. But if I turn my attention to this problem, if you do likewise, you will know more about it than you might think. You have grasped the difference between the general and the particular even in the least significant portions, for you wouldn't dare tell me you have ever, at any time since you first took up the brush, bound yourself to rigorous imitation of each and every strand of hair. You've added some and eliminated others; otherwise you would not have produced an image of the first order, a copy of the truth, but a portrait or copy of a copy, φαντάσματος, οὐκ ἀληθείας;²⁰ and you would have been working on a third order of reality, for between the truth and your work, the truth or prototype would have intervened, its dependent phantom which served as your model, and the copy you made of this imprecise shadow, of this phantom. Your line would not have been the true line, the line of beauty, the ideal line, but a line somehow altered, deformed, literally descriptive, individualized; and Phidias would have said of you: τρίτος ἐπὶ ἀπὸ τῆς καλῆς γύναικος καὶ ἀληθείας.²¹ there is, between truth and its image, the beautiful individual woman which he has chosen for his model. But the artist who reflects before contradicting me will say: Where then is the real model, if it does not exist in nature, either wholly or in part; and if one can say of the least significant and best choice, φαντάσματος, οὐκ ἀληθείας;²² To this I would reply: And if I had not been able to teach you this, would you have been any less aware of the truth of what I have told you? Would it be any less true that rigorous imitation of a fingernail, of a strand of hair through the use of a microscopic eye would result in a portrait? But I am going to show you that you have this eye, and that you use it ceaselessly. Wouldn't you agree that every being, above all those that are animate, has its functions, its passions determined in life; and that with practice and over time these functions sometimes effect over its entire organization so marked an alteration that this function becomes discernible? Wouldn't you agree that this alteration affects not only the integral mass, but that it is impossible for it to affect this integral mass without also affecting each of its separate parts? Wouldn't you agree that when you have rendered both the alteration of the mass and the consequent alteration of each of its constituent parts, you've made a portrait? There is, then, something that is distinct from what you have painted, something that you've

20 "The phantom and not the thing itself."

21 "You are only on the third level, after the beautiful woman and beauty itself."

22 "The phantom and not the thing itself."

painted which is between the primary model and you copy . . . —But where is the primary model . . . —One moment, by mercy, and perhaps we'll arrive at this point. Wouldn't you also agree that the inner, soft portions of the animal, the first to develop, determine the form of the hard portions? Wouldn't you agree that this influence is general for the entire system? Wouldn't you agree that independently of the daily, habitual functions which will soon have ruined what nature had so superlatively made, it is impossible to imagine, among so many causes which act and react in the formation, development, and extension of so complicated a machine, an equilibrium so rigorous and continuously maintained that nothing would have gone awry, be it on the side of excess or on that of absence? You agree that, if you're not struck by these observations, this is because you have not the slightest acquaintance with anatomy and physiology, nor the slightest notion of nature. You agree at least that in this multitude of heads which swarm in our public promenades on a beautiful day, you'll not find a single one whose profile is identical to the profile of another, not one the sides of whose mouth do not differ perceptibly from all the others, not one which, if viewed in a concave mirror, would correspond with itself point for point. You agree that he spoke in a manner worthy of a great artist and a man of good sense, this Vernet, when he said to the students at the school engaged in drawing "caricatures,"* Yes, these folds are large, ample, and beautiful; but bear in mind that you will never see them again. You agree, then, that there is not, nor could there be, either an entire subsisting animal nor a portion of a subsisting animal which, strictly speaking, you could take as a primary model. You agree then that this model is purely ideal, and that it is not directly imprinted on any of the individual images in nature, copies of which have remained in your imagination, and that you can summon up at will, hold before your eyes and slavishly copy, to the extent that you wish to avoid portraiture. You agree that, when you make something beautiful, you do not make it of something that exists, or even of something that could exist. You agree that the difference between the portraitist and yourself, a man of genius, is essentially that the portraitist faithfully renders nature as it is, and by inclination remains on the third order of reality, while you seek out the truth, the primary model, and ceaselessly attempt to raise yourself to the second order . . . —You embarrass me; all of that is nothing but metaphysics . . . —Blockhead, doesn't your art have its metaphysics? Isn't this metaphysics, whose object is nature, nature the beautiful, truth, the primary model to which you conform in

* Note by Diderot: At the school, once a week, the students assemble, one of them serving as a model. His comrade poses him and then wraps him in a piece of white fabric, draping it as best he can, and this is called drawing "caricatures."

order to avoid being a portraitist, the most sublime metaphysics of all? Pay no attention to the objections made by unthinking fools to profound men who think . . . —Well, without racking my brain too much: When I want to make a statue of a beautiful woman; I have a great number undress for me; all of them have some parts that are beautiful and others that are misshapen; I take from each of them whatever is beautiful . . . —And how do you recognize these parts? —Why by comparison with the antique, which I've studied closely. —And if the antique had not existed, how would you proceed? You do not respond. Listen to me then, for I will try to explain to you how the ancients, who had no antiquities, proceeded, how you became what you are, and the logic of a routine to which, for better or worse, you adhere without ever having questioned its origin. If what I've just told you is true, then the most beautiful model, the most perfect man or woman, will be a man or woman superlatively well adapted to all of life's functions, who will have attained the age of mature development without having exercised any of them. But seeing that nature never vouchsafes such a model to us, either in whole or in part, as all its products are corrupt; seeing that the most perfect ones issuing from its workshop are subject to circumstances, obligations, and needs that deform them still further, such as the primal need for self-preservation and reproduction, they become progressively distant from truth, from the primary model, from the mental image, such that there is not, has never been, and never will be either a whole or a single portion of a whole that has not been tainted. So, my friend, do you know what the ancients did? Through long observation and consummate experience, by means of a taste, an instinct, a kind of inspiration vouchsafed only to rare geniuses, and perhaps a project, natural to idolaters, to elevate man above his condition and impress a divine character upon him, a character from which all that is contentious in our paltry, impoverished, shabby, and miserable lives had been excluded, they began to develop a sensitivity to these great changes, to the most extreme deformities and the most intense suffering. This was the first step, one that really affected only the general mass of the animal system, or a few of its main parts. With the passage of time, in an advance which was slow, tentative, painfully groping, by means of a muffled, obscure notion of analogy acquired through an infinitude of successive observations since lost to memory but whose effects remain, the recasting was effected on lesser parts, and then on still lesser parts, and after these on the very smallest ones, such as fingernails, eyelids, eyelashes, and hair, ceaselessly, and with an astonishing circumspection, effacing the changes and deformities worked by corrupting nature, either at the point of origin or through circumstantial necessity, becoming more and more distant from portraiture,

from the false line, to rise to the true ideal model of beauty, to the true line; a true line, and an ideal model of beauty, which existed only in the heads of Agasias, Raphael, Poussin, Puget, Pigalle, Falconet, and their like; an ideal model of beauty, a true line, of which lesser artists have but an incomplete notion, gained through exposure to the antique or to their works;²³ an ideal model of beauty, a true line which the great masters cannot inspire in their students however rigorous their course of instruction; an ideal model of beauty, a true line enabling them to rise playfully to the formulation of chimeras, sphinxes, centaurs, hippogryphs, fauns, and all other polyglot beings; from which they can descend to produce various portraits from the life, caricatures, monsters, grotesques, according to the dose of deceit required by their composition and the effect they wish to produce, such that it's almost meaningless to query the acceptable limits of deviation from the ideal model of beauty, the true line; an ideal model of beauty, a true line that is non-traditional, and that all but vanishes with the man of genius, who over a certain period shapes the spirit, character, and taste of the productions of a people, a century, a school; an ideal model of beauty, a true line that the man of genius will calibrate in accordance with the climate, government, laws, and circumstances into which he was born; an ideal model of beauty, a true line that becomes corrupt, that disappears, and that perhaps can only be solidly re-established among a given people through the return to a barbaric state; for this is the only condition in which men convinced of their ignorance can resolve to accept the frustration of tentative groping; others remain mediocre precisely because, in a manner of speaking, they are learned from birth. Servile, almost stupid imitators of their predecessors, they study nature as perfection, and not as something that can be perfected; they seek it out, not to bring it into conformity with the ideal model or the true line, but rather more closely to approximate the copy of it made by those who possessed it. Poussin said that the most skillful among them²⁴ was an eagle in comparison with the moderns, and an ass in comparison with the ancients. Scrupulous imitators of the antique keep their eyes peeled for the phenomenal, but none of them understands why. At first they remain slightly below the level of their model; little by little they become further removed from it; from the fourth remove of the portraitist or copyist, they lower themselves to the hundredth. But, you say to me, then it will never be possible for our artists to equal the ancients. I believe this is true, so long as they continue to follow their present route; by studying only nature, and not taking

23 That is, those of the great masters.

24 Raphael.

their investigations any further, in finding it to be beautiful only in antique copies, however sublime they might be, however faithful an image of their model they might propose. To recast nature after the antique is to proceed in the opposite direction from the ancients; it is always to work after a copy. And then, my friend, don't you believe there's a difference between belonging to the primitive school in on the secret, sharing the national spirit, being quickened by the enthusiasm and penetrated by the views attendant upon the procedures and approaches of those who've produced something on one hand, and, on the other, simply seeing the thing that was produced? Don't you believe there's a difference between Pigalle and Falconet in Paris looking at the *Gladiator*, and Pigalle and Falconet in Athens and in the presence of Agasias? It's an old wives' tale, my friend, that in order to formulate the statue, real or imagined, that the ancients called the canon²⁵ and that I call the ideal model or the true line, they scoured nature, borrowing from her the most beautiful portions of an infinity of individuals, from which they constituted a whole. How would they have recognized the beauty of these portions? Especially of those rarely exposed to our eyes, such as the belly, the upper loins, and the articulation of the thighs and the arms, in which the *poco piu* and the *poco meno*²⁶ are understood by so few artists, and are judged beautiful in accordance with a popular opinion confronting the artist at his birth and that shapes his judgment? Only a hair's breadth intervenes between a form's beauty and its deformity. How did they acquire the sensitivity necessary to seek out the most beautiful forms, so widely dispersed, of which a whole could be formed? This is the problem. And once these forms are found, by what obscure method did they set about fusing them? How were they inspired to select an appropriate proportional scale? To put forward such a paradox, isn't this to maintain that these artists had the most profound knowledge of beauty, that they resorted to its true ideal model, to the good-faith route before having produced a single beautiful thing? But I tell you that such an enterprise is impossible, absurd. I tell you that if they'd possessed the ideal model, the true line in their imagination, they'd have found no portions that, strictly speaking, they could deem acceptable. I tell you that if such had been the case they would have been no more than portraitists of what they would have copied slavishly. I tell you that it's not with the aid of an infinity of small, isolated portraits that one rises to the primary, original model, either wholly or in part; that they followed another path, and that what I have just described is the inquiring human spirit. I don't deny that

25 *Règle*: a reference to the *Doryphorus* of Polyclitus. See the article "règle" in the *Encyclopédie*.

26 "A little more" and "a little less."

a substantially corrupted nature inspired the initial recasting impulse, nor that for a long time they regarded some natures as perfect whose corruption they were unable to perceive; unless there was a rare, violent genius who managed to hurl himself onto the third level, from which he gropingly communicated with the crowd on the second. But I hold that this genius came later, and that he alone could not have accomplished the work of time and an entire nation. I hold that it's in this interval of the third level, that of the portraitists of what's most beautiful in subsisting nature, whether wholes or discrete portions, that are situated all possible praiseworthy, successful varieties of handling, all the imperceptible nuances of the good, the better, and the excellent. I hold that everything higher is chimerical and that everything lower is impoverished, paltry, corrupted. I hold that without resort to the notions I've just established, the terms "exaggeration," "impoverished nature," and "paltry nature" will forever be pronounced without a clear idea of their meaning. I hold that the main reason the arts have never, in any century or nation, attained a degree of perfection equal to that achieved in Greece is that this is the only place on earth where they were reduced to proceeding tentatively; that, thanks to the models they left us, we've never been able, like them, to slowly, successfully attain the beauty of these models; that we have made ourselves slavish imitators, to a greater or lesser degree mere portraitists, and that we've never been possessed of more than vague, indistinct borrowings from the ideal model, the true route; that if all these models had been destroyed, there is every reason to believe that, obliged like them to drag ourselves after a misshapen, imperfect, corrupted nature, we would have managed, like them, to arrive at a first, original model, at a true line which would have been our own, as it is not now and never can be. To speak frankly, it seems to me that the masterpieces of the ancients will always attest to the sublimity of artists of the past and eternally guarantee the mediocrity of future artists. This makes me angry. But the inviolable laws of nature must do their work; nature never does anything in a single bound, and this holds true for the arts just as much as for the universe as a whole. You won't need me to point out what follows from this, namely the impossibility, confirmed by the experience of all peoples in all eras, of a single people's maintaining its fine arts production at a high level of achievement over several centuries; and that these principles apply equally to eloquence, poetry, and perhaps language. The famous Garrick²⁷ said to the Chevalier de Chastelux,²⁸ "However sensitive nature may have made you, if you perform with reference only to yourself, or to the most perfect subsistent nature

27 David Garrick (1717-79), the most celebrated actor of his time.

28 François-Jean, marquis de Chastelux (1734-88). French soldier and writer.

known to you, you can only be mediocre." "Mediocre! And why is that?" "Because for you, for me, and for the spectator there is an ideally possible man who, in a given circumstance, would respond differently from yourself. Such is the imaginary being you should take as your model. The more vivid your conception of him, the more extraordinary, marvellous, and sublime, the grander you will be." "You never play yourself, then?" "I take particular care not to. And this goes not only for myself, but for the chevalier as well as everyone in my circle. When I tear my guts apart, when I scream like an animal; these are not my own guts, nor my own cries, but rather the guts and cries of another I've imagined and who doesn't exist." Now, my friend, there isn't a single poet in existence who won't agree with Garrick's lesson. His position is well considered, thoroughly pondered, containing the "secundus a natura" and the "tertius ab idea" of Plato,²⁹ which is the germ and proof of everything I've said. For models, great ones, while useful to men of mediocre gifts, are a great hindrance to men of genius. After this digression which, true or false, few other than yourself will be tempted to accord the importance it deserves, because few will comprehend the distinct character of a notion generated by oneself or which generates itself, I turn to the Salon, or rather to the various productions which our artists exhibited there this year. I've given you fair warning of my sterility, or rather of the exhausted state to which I've been reduced by the preceding Salons. But I will try to compensate what's lacking in the way of digressions, insights, principles, and reflections with the precision of my descriptions and the equity of my judgments. So let us enter the sanctuary. Let us look, look long and hard, and respond and judge. Above all, my friend, master of the shop of "Evergreen Holly,"³⁰ as I must either keep my mouth shut or speak my mind frankly, swear all your subscribers to a solemn oath of silence. I don't want to make anyone unhappy, nor find myself so. I don't want to add a swarm of supernumeraries to the already swarming host of my enemies. Say to your subscribers that artists are easily annoyed, "genus irritabile vatum."³¹ Say that in their anger they're more violent and more dangerous than wasps.

29 "One remove from nature" and "two removes from the Form."

30 Diderot had invented a personal emblem for Grimm picturing a plant, the French phrase "Au Houx, toujours vert" ("To holly, always green") above and the Latin legend *Semper frondescit* below. The latter phrase translates into French as "il fait toujours des feuilles" ("he/it is always making leaves"). There is a bilingual pun here: *feuilles* means both leaves (of a plant) and sheets or pages (of a manuscript). Thus Diderot's emblem pokes fun at Grimm's journalistic fecundity as editor of the *Correspondance littéraire*.

31 "Irritable race of poets": Horace, *Epistles*, II, ii, v. 102.

Say that I want to avoid exposure to wasps. Say that any indiscretion would violate the friendship and confidence many of them have bestowed on me. Say that these pages, should they fall into the wrong hands, would make me seem wicked, false, untrustworthy, and ungrateful. Say that as national prejudices are accorded no more respect in my lines than are poor technique, the vices of the great, artists' faults, and the extravagances of society in general and of the Academy in particular, there's enough here to ruin a hundred men stronger than I. Say that if it fell out that a small service I'd rendered you out of friendship became a source of great regret for me, that you would never forgive yourself. Say that, however inconvenient, the terms of this pact must be honored. Give my very humble respects to Madame la Princesse de Nassau-Saarbruck, and continue to send her the sheets which amuse her. To start, my friend, we'll take up Michel Van Loo.

Sine ira et studio quorum causas procul habeo. Tacitus.³²

Here is my criticism and my praise. I extol or censure in accordance with my own feelings, which should not be taken as law. God asks of us only that we be sincere with ourselves. Artists would prefer us to be less exacting. The phrases "That's beautiful" and "That's bad" are quickly uttered; but the justification of one's pleasure or distaste requires time, and I am at the disposition of a devil of a man who's in a hurry. Pray to God that this man might be converted and, head bowed before the door of the Salon, make a full apology to the Academy for any ill-considered judgments I'm about to pronounce.

MICHEL VAN LOO³³

This is not Carle.³⁴ Carle is dead. There are two oval canvases by Michel, one of *Painting* and the other of *Sculpture*. They

32 "Without anger and without partiality, from which motives I stand sufficiently removed": Tacitus, *Annals*, I, 1.

33 Louis-Michel Van Loo (1707-71). Student of his father Jean-Baptiste Van Loo; nephew of Carle Van Loo. Received as a full royal academician on April 25, 1733 (as a history painter). From ca. 1765 on friendly terms with Diderot. He spent fifteen years in Spain, where he was named First Painter to the King in 1744. He returned to Paris in 1752, where until his death he pursued a prolific career as a portraitist.

34 Charles-André Van Loo, known as Carle Van Loo (1705-65). Student of his elder

are each about one and a quarter meters wide by one meter high.

Sculpture is seated. She faces us directly, her hair dressed in the Roman style, her glance confident, her right arm rotated with the back of the hand resting on her hip; her other arm is placed on the modelling turntable, chisel in hand. On the turntable sits a bust which is underway.

Why this majestic character? Why this arm posed on the hip? Are these studio trappings consistent with the air of nobility? Eliminate the turntable, the chisel, and the bust and one would take this symbolic figure of one of the arts for an empress. "But she's imposing." Agreed. "But the rotated arm and the fist posed on the hip confer nobility and indicate repose." They confer nobility, if you like. They indicate repose, certainly. "But a hundred times a day the artist assumes this posture, either because weariness has suspended his work, or because he is backing away from it, to judge of its effect." I've seen what you describe. What does it imply? Is it any less true that every symbol should have an appropriate, distinctive character? That if you approve of this Sculpture as Empress, you will at least censure this bourgeois Painting, which is its pendant? "The use of color in the first one is fine." Perhaps a bit dingy. "The drapery is well handled, very correctly drawn and quite effective." Let's change the subject; but don't forget that an artist who treats this kind of subject keeps to the imitation of nature or abandons himself to the emblematic, and that this last course imposes upon him the necessity of finding an expression of genius, a physiognomy that's unique, original, and appropriate, the strong, energetic image of an individual quality. Look at this crowd of swiftly moving, uncoercible spirits that emerged from the head of Bouchardon³⁵ and that march to the tune of *Ulysses Summoning The Ghost of Tiresias*. Look at these carefree *Naiads*, indolent and indistinct, by Jean Goujon. The waters of the Fountain of the Innocents do not flow more freely. Symbols twist and turn like they do. Look at a certain Cupid by Van Dyck. He's a child. But what a child! He's the master of men; he's the master of the gods. One would say that he defies heaven and threatens earth. He's the "quos ego" of the poet³⁶ depicted for the first time.

brother Jean-Baptiste Van Loo. Received as a full royal academician July 30, 1735; named First Painter to the King in 1762.

35 Edme Bouchardon (1698-1762). Student of his father Jean-Baptiste Bouchardon and Guillaume Coustou. Received as a full royal academician on February 17, 1745.

36 "Ye I'll—": Virgil, *Aeneid*, I, v. 135 (a preliminary expression of anger uttered by Neptune and then stifled).

And then, I ask you, wouldn't you prefer the hair to be less severe, the drapery looser and less carefully placed, and her glance focused on the bust?

Michel's *Painting* is seated before her easel; she's seen in profile. She holds a palette and brush in her hand. She's working. Her facial expression is unexceptional. There is nothing of the ardour of creative genius. She's grey, she's insipid. The handling is slack, slack, slack.

After these two works come countless portraits, if all are taken into account; a few, if only the good ones, are counted.

That of *Cardinal Choiseul* is skillful, a good likeness, well seated, a convincing physical presence, it could not possibly be better posed or dressed. It is nature and truth itself. This clothing has not been artificially arranged. The greater one's taste, true taste, the greater one's attraction to the cardinal. He brings to mind the cardinals and popes by Giulio Romano, Raphael, and Van Dyck that are visible in the first rooms of the Palais Royal. His fur is just like that at the furrier's.

The Abbé de Breteuil

The *Abbé de Breteuil*, an equally good likeness, more striking in its color, but less vigorous, less skillful, less harmonious. Besides, he has the complacent, disengaged air of an Abbé who is a great lord and a lecher.

Monsieur Diderot (Pl. 1)

Myself. I am fond of Michel, but I am fonder still of truth. A fairly good likeness. To those who do not recognize him he can say, like the farmer in the comic opera, "That's because he's never seen me without my wig."³⁷ Very lively. It has his kindness, along with his vivacity. But too young, his head too small. Pretty like a woman, leering, smiling, dainty, pursing his mouth to make himself look captivating. None of the skillful use of color in the *Cardinal Choiseul*. And then clothing so luxurious as to ruin the poor man of letters should the tax collector levy payment against his dressing gown. The writing table, books, and accessories as fine as possible, when brilliant color and harmony were both aimed at. Sparkling from close up, vigorous from a distance, especially the flesh. And beautiful well-modelled hands, though the left one is badly drawn. He faces

37 Michel-Jean Sedaine, *Le Jardinier et son seigneur* (1761), scene vii.

us. His head is uncovered. His grey forelock, with his air of affectation, makes him seem like an old flirt still out to charm; his posture, more like a government official than a philosopher. The falsity of the first moment of his posing left its mark on the remainder. Madame Van Loo³⁸ came to chatter with him while he was being painted, giving him that air and spoiling everything. If she had played her harpsichord, if she had played or sung *Non ha ragione, ingrato, Un core abbandonato*,³⁹ or some other piece in the same vein, the sensitive philosopher would have taken on another character completely, and the portrait would have differed accordingly. Or better still, he should have been left alone, abandoned to his reveries. Then his mouth would have been partially open, his glance would have been distracted, focused on the distance, the workings of his thoroughly preoccupied head would have been legible on his face, and Michel would have produced a beautiful thing. My pretty philosopher, you will always serve me as precious testimony to the friendship of an artist, an excellent artist, and a more excellent man. But what will my grandchildren say, when they compare my sad works to this smiling, affected, effeminate old flirt? My children, I warn you that this is not me. In the course of single day I assumed a hundred different expressions, in accordance with the things that affected me. I was serene, sad, pensive, tender, violent, passionate, enthusiastic. But I was never such as you see me here. I had a large forehead, penetrating eyes, rather large features, a head quite similar in character to that of an ancient orator, an easygoing nature that sometimes approached stupidity, the rustic simplicity of ancient times. Without the exaggeration of my features introduced into the engraving after Greuze's drawing, it would be a better likeness. I have a facial mask that fools artists, either because too many of its features blend together or because the impressions of my soul succeed one another very quickly and register themselves on my face, such that the painter's eye does not perceive me to be the same from one moment to the next and his task becomes far more difficult than he'd expected. I've never been well captured save by a poor devil named Garant,⁴⁰ who managed to trap me, just as an idiot sometimes comes up with a witty remark. Whoever sees my portrait by Garant, sees me. "Ecco il vero

38 Christine Van Loo, Carle's widow, a celebrated singer whom he'd met during his sojourn in Turin; she lived with Louis-Michel Van Loo after her husband's death in 1765.

39 "You are not right, ungrateful one, an abandoned heart . . .": the opening text of an aria from Sarro's opera *Didone* (1724; act I, acene 17), with libretto by Metastasio.

40 Presumably Jean-Baptiste Garand (?-1780), a member of the Academy of Saint Luke from 1761 who exhibited in its Salons in 1762, 1764, and 1774.

Polichinello."⁴¹ Monsieur Grimm has had it engraved, but he has not made it accessible. He is still waiting for an inscription which he will have only when I have produced something that will render me immortal. "And when will that be?" When? Perhaps tomorrow. And who knows what I might do! I feel that I've not yet exploited half my strength. Until this moment, I've only bantered. I forget to mention among the good portraits of me the bust by Mademoiselle Collot,⁴² especially the last one that belongs to my friend Monsieur Grimm. It is good, it is very good; in his home it has taken the place of another by her master Falconet, which was not good. When Falconet saw his student's bust he took his hammer and smashed his own in her presence. That was frank and courageous. The bust having been broken into pieces by the artist's blow, two beautiful ears survived intact, topped by the vile wig in which Madame Geoffrin⁴³ had insisted on decking me out. Monsieur Grimm was never able to forgive Madame Geoffrin for this wig. God be praised, now they've been reconciled, and Falconet, this artist so unconcerned about his future reputation, this determined scornor of immortality, this man so *disrespectful* of posterity, has been spared the anxiety of transmitting to it a poor bust. I would say, however, that in this poor bust traces were visible of a secret inner wound which was devouring me when the artist made it. How can an artist sometimes fail to duplicate the obvious features of a face he has right before his eyes, and yet manage to capture on canvas or in wet clay the secret feelings and impressions hidden within a soul that's unknown to him? La Tour made a portrait of one of his friends. Someone told this friend that he'd been given a brown complexion he didn't have. The work was returned to the artist's studio and a day set for the retouching session. The friend arrived at the appointed time. The artist took up his pastels, went to work, and ruined everything; he cried out: I've ruined it; you look like a man fighting to stay awake . . . and such was in fact the case, for his model had spent the night watching over a sick relative.

Madame la Princesse de Chimay, Monsieur le Chevalier de Fitz-James, her brother, you are terrible, absolutely terrible; you are insipid, utterly insipid. Into storage. No nuance, no transitions, no modulation in the flesh tones. Princess, tell me, don't you feel the weight of this curtain which you're holding? It's difficult to say which of the siblings is the stiffest and the coldest.

41 "This is the real Punchinello."

42 Marie-Anne Collot (1748-1821). Sculptor; student of Falconet. She later married his son Pierre-Étienne Falconet.

43 Marie-Thérèse Rodet Geoffrin (1699-1777), hostess of a celebrated Parisian salon. On Mondays she received artists, on Wednesdays writers and men of letters.

The Chaste Susanna

Small painting, pendant to the preceding one

It may be, my friend, that I'm about to repeat myself, that what follows has already appeared in one of my previous Salons.

An Italian painter once imagined a most ingenious way of treating this subject. He placed two old men to the right, in the background. The Susanna was standing in the foreground. To block the view of the old men she held up her clothing on the side facing them, leaving her nudity completely exposed to the view of the spectator looking at the painting. This gesture of Susanna's seems so natural that only upon reflection does one realize the painter's intentions, and the figure's lack of decency, if such there is. A scene represented on canvas or in the theater doesn't presuppose observers. A nude woman isn't indecent. It's the lavishly decked out woman who is. Imagine the *Medici Venus* is standing in front of you, and tell me if her nudity offends you. But shoe this Venus' feet with two little embroidered slippers. Dress her in tight white stockings secured at the knee with rose-colored garters. Place a chic little hat on her head, and you'll feel the difference between decent and indecent quite vividly. It's the difference between a woman seen and a woman displaying herself. I believe I've already been over this with you. But no matter.

In Lagrenée's composition the old men are standing to the left, and they are fine figures, well colored, well draped, quite cold.

Everyone recognizes here the beautiful Comtesse de Sabran⁷⁹ who captivated Philippe d'Orléans, the Regent, for so long. She had dissipated an immense fortune; and there came a time when she had nothing more and was in debt to everyone, to her butcher, to her baker, to her female attendants, to her valets, to her dressmaker, and to her shoemaker. The latter arrived one day, hoping to extract some money from her. "My child," the countess told him, "I know well that I've been in debt to you for a long time. But what would you have me do? I haven't got a penny. I'm stripped bare, so poor that my ass shows." And while pronouncing these words she lifted her petticoats and showed her behind to her shoemaker who, touched, moved, said while taking his leave, "Good lord, it's true!" The shoemaker was reduced to tears, but the countess' female attendants laughed: while to them the countess seemed indecent, she struck her shoemaker as decent, compelling, even moving.

But this is not what I set out to say . . . —And what did you want to say, then? —Another idiocy. One pronounces so many without

79 Madeleine-Louis-Charlotte de Foix-Rabat (1693–1768). In 1714 she married the Count of Sabran and became the Regent's mistress.

realizing it that the occasional scruple on this point is very much in order. I wanted to say that in her maturity she found herself obliged to accept whatever dinner invitations were offered her. She received one from Commissioner Le Comte. She appeared at the appointed time. The commissioner, who was courteous, descended to receive the beautiful, impoverished, aged countess. She was escorted by a gentleman whose arm was intertwined with hers. They went up the stairs. The commissioner followed. In ascending, the countess' lovely legs were revealed to his view and, above these legs, a rump so ample, so clearly delineated beneath her petticoats, so attractive, that the commissioner succumbed to temptation and gently slipped his hand onto it. The countess, a most logical creature, calmly turned around and placed her own hand on that part of the commissioner where she expected to find the cause of his insolence and its excuse; but not finding it there, she gave him a good slap. Well, my friend, this is how Lagrenée's Susanna would have responded to the old men if she'd been equally logical. I don't know what they're saying to her, but I'm sure she'd have embarrassed them if she'd responded as did one of our women to a man accompanying her home in her carriage who, along the way, made proposals she felt to be inappropriate: "Take care, Monsieur. I'm going to surrender." The old men, then, are cold, bad. As for Susanna, she's beautiful, very beautiful. She's expressive. She covers herself. Her glance is directed heavenwards. She's appealing for help. But her pain and her fear are in such bizarre contrast with the tranquility of the old men that if the subject weren't indicated there'd be no way to figure it out. Very likely one would mistake the two men for two relatives of the woman who'd arrived brusquely to convey a bit of bad news. Otherwise, once again the most beautiful handling, and once again it is misapplied. An accomplished hand setting forth the most insignificant things in the most beautiful script, one that would serve the writing masters Rossignol or Rouallet admirably as models.

You see, my friend, how I'm getting to be lewd, like all old men. After a certain point looseness of tone can no longer cast suspicion on one's morals, and we no longer hesitate to employ cynical expressions, which are the most direct. Such, at any rate, is the justification I would propose for the coarseness with which some women condemned the first chapters of *The Defense of My Uncle*.⁸⁰ One of them whom you know well, whether satisfied or not by my reasoning, says to me, "Monsieur, don't insist any further on this

80 *La Défense de mon oncle* by Voltaire (1767), a rebuttal of a critique of his *Philosophie de l'histoire*. Its opening chapters discuss Babylonian temple prostitution, the sexual rights of feudal lords over women on their marriage nights, sodomy, incest, bestiality, etc.

point, for you'll make me think that I was always old." She's the woman whose regular morning meditations are devoted to Montaigne⁸¹ and who learned from him, correctly or no, to take greater offense at discourteous deeds than at discourteous words.

Cupid the Knife-Grinder

Small painting

A composition calling for finesse, intelligence, grace, tact, in a word, everything that can render such bagatelles worthwhile. Well, this is heavy-handed and tiresome. The scene unfolds in front of a landscape. And what a landscape! It's ponderous; its trees resemble those on the shop signs from the Notre Dame bridge; there's no air between their trunks and branches; no lightness; no vibrancy in the leaves, which are so firmly glued together that the wildest hurricane wouldn't detach a single one. To the right, a cupid crouches before a grindstone, wetting it down with water gathered in the cup of his hand from a jug in front of him. On the same plane is Cupid the Knife-Grinder, reclining on his stomach on the wooden frame the workers call the plank,⁸² sharpening one of his arrows. To the side and to the foreground beneath him, a third cupid operates the wheel by turning its crank with his hands.

All this is infinitely less true, less interesting, less animated than the same scene would be if set in a cutler's shop, invaded one Sunday by his children during their parents' absence. Then I'd see the shop, the forge, bellows, grindstones, suspended pulleys, hammers, pincers, files, and all the other tools. I'd see one of the children keeping watch at the door. I'd see another up on a stool who, having fired up the forge, was hammering away on the anvil; and others engaged in finishing at the vice, and all these rough and ready, ragged little rascals would afford me infinitely greater pleasure than these large cupids, who are cold, tepid, chubby, and nude. But the author of the first of these paintings could never have produced the second. That would call for quite a different sort of talent. My composition would be full of life, of the kind artists call stew.⁸³ His doesn't have a trace of it. A bad picture. Such is the effect of all these allegorical subjects borrowed from pagan mythology. Painters immerse themselves in this mythology and lose all taste for the natural events of everyday life, producing nothing but scenes that

81 Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (1533–92). French writer, celebrated for his posthumously published *Essais*.

82 "La planche."

83 The French word here is *ragoût*; it was standard eighteenth-century studio lingo.

are indecent, mad, extravagant, idealized, or at least empty of genuine interest. For of what concern to me are all the dubious exploits of Jupiter, Venus, Hercules, Hebe, Ganymede, and all the other divinities of fable? Wouldn't a comic episode drawn from our own experience, a moving episode drawn from our own history speak to me more directly . . . I think so, you say. Why is it then, you add, that art focuses on such things so rarely . . . There are many reasons for this, my friend. The first is that real subjects are infinitely more difficult to depict, demanding an astonishing sense of truth. The second is that young students prefer, and should prefer, subjects into which they can introduce the figures they've been studying. The third is that the nude, so beautiful in painting and sculpture, doesn't figure in our daily lives. The fourth is that there's nothing so ignoble, impoverished, tiresome, and ungrateful as our own clothing. The fifth is that these fabulous mythological beings are larger and more beautiful, that is to say they correspond more closely to the conventional rules of drawing. But I might be surprised, if we were not such clusters of contradictions, to learn that painters had been granted a license withheld from poets. Greuze could exhibit a Death of Henry IV tomorrow as well as the Jacobin plunging the knife into Henry III's belly, and no one would object, while a poet would never be allowed to depict such a thing on the stage.

*Jupiter and Juno on Mount Ida,
Put to Sleep by Morpheus*

To the right is Morpheus, attractively disposed on a bank of clouds; he deploys two large batwings fit to reduce our friend Monsieur Le Romain,⁸⁴ who has taken a dislike to wings, to despair. Jupiter is seated. Morpheus touches him with his poppies and his head falls forward. But what are these woolly clouds that encircle him? His flesh is that of a young man, while his character is that of an old man. His head resembles a Silenus: small, short, and flushed. Artists will say he's well painted, and let them. The crown is slipping from his head. Juno, in the right foreground, places her right hand on drowsy Jupiter's, her left arm rests on her own thighs, and her head nestles against her husband's chest. Jupiter's left arm circles his wife's back, and his right arm rests on clouds which seem solid enough to support it. What, can this be the majestic head of the imperious Juno? Surely you jest, Monsieur Lagrenée. I know her.

84 Chief engineer on the island of Grenada; he wrote articles on sugar for the *Encyclopédie*.

freshly painted they'd look very different from the Carraccis before their eyes today. But who will instill in them an appreciation for time's effects? Who will help them resist the temptation to produce tomorrow the equivalent of old paintings which have aged for a century? Good sense and experience.

I'm well aware that Chardin's models, the inanimate objects he depicts, neither move nor change color or form, and that, other things being equal, a portrait by La Tour has greater merit than a still life by Chardin. But a flap of time's wings will leave nothing to support the former's reputation. The precious powder will fly from its support, half of it scattered in the air and half clinging to Saturn's long feathers. La Tour will be discussed, but Chardin will be seen.

It's said of the latter that his technique is totally idiosyncratic and that he uses his thumb as much as his brush. I don't know if this is true, but I'm sure of one thing, namely that I've never known anyone who's seen him work. However that might be, his compositions appeal equally to the uninitiated and to the connoisseur. They have a coloristic vigor, an overall harmony, a liveliness and truth, beautiful massing, a handling so magical as to induce despair, and an energy in their disposition and arrangement that's incredible. Back away, move in close, the illusion is the same, there's no confusion, no artificiality, no distracting flickering effects; the eye is always diverted, because calm and serenity are everywhere. One stops in front of a Chardin as if by instinct, just as a traveller exhausted by his trip tends to sit down, almost without noticing it, in a place that's green, quiet, well watered, shady, and cool.

VERNET¹²²

I'd inscribed this artist's name at the head of my page and was about to review his works with you, when I left for a country close to the sea and celebrated for the beauty of its sites. There, while some spent the day's most beautiful hours, the most beautiful days, their money, and their gaiety on green lawns, and others, shotguns over their shoulders, overcame their exhaustion to pursue their dogs through the fields, and others still wandered aimlessly through the remote corners of a park whose trees, happily for their young

¹²² Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714-89). Student of his father Jacques Viali (a carriage painter, in Aix-en-Provence) and Philippe Sauvan (in Avignon). Granted provisional membership in the Royal Academy on August 6, 1746; received as a full academician August 23, 1753.

consorts in delusion, are models of discretion; while a few serious people, as late as seven o'clock in the evening, still made the dining room resound with their tumultuous discussion of the new principles of the economists, the utility or uselessness of philosophy, religion, morals, actors, actresses, government, the relative merits of the two kinds of music, the fine arts, literature, and other important questions, the solutions to which they sought at the bottom of bottles, and returned, staggering and hoarse, to their rooms, whose doors they found only with difficulty, and, having relaxed in an armchair, began to recover from the intensity and zeal with which they'd sacrificed their lungs, their stomachs, and their reason in the hope of introducing the greatest possible order into all branches of administration; there I went, accompanied by the tutor of the children of the household and his two charges, my cane and writing pad in hand, to visit the most beautiful sites in the world. My intention is to describe them to you, and I hope that these descriptions will prove worth the trouble. My companion for these walks was thoroughly familiar with the lie of the land, and knew the best time to take in each rustic scene, and the places best viewed in the morning hours, which were most charming and interesting at sunrise and which at sunset, as well as the coolest, shadiest areas in which to seek refuge from the burning midday sun. He was the *cicerone* of this region; he did the honors for newcomers, and no one knew better than he how to maximize the impact of the spectator's first glance. We were off, and we chatted as we walked. I was moving along with my head lowered, as is my custom, when I felt my movement suddenly checked and was confronted with the following site.

FIRST SITE (Pl. 15)

To my right, in the distance, a mountain summit rose to meet the clouds. At this moment chance had placed a traveller there, upright and serene. The base of the mountain was obscured from us by an intervening mass of rock; the foot of this rock stretched across the view, rising and falling, such that it severed the scene's foreground from its background. To the far right, on an outcropping of rock, I saw two figures which could not have been more artfully placed to maximize their effect; they were two fishermen; one was seated towards the bottom of the rock, his legs dangling; the other, his catch slung over his back, bent over the first and conversed with him. On the rugged embankment formed by the extension of the

lower portion of the rock, where it extended into the distance, a covered wagon driven by a peasant descended towards a village beyond the embankment: another incident which art would have suggested. Passing over the crest of this embankment, my gaze encountered the tops of the village houses and continued on, plunging into and losing itself in a landscape prospect that merged with the sky.

Who among your artists, my *cicerone* asked me, would have imagined breaking up the continuity of this rugged embankment with a clump of trees? —Perhaps Vernet. —Right, but would your Vernet have imagined such elegance and charm? Would he have been able to render the intense, lively effect of the play of light on the trunks and their branches? —Why not? —Depict the vast distances taken in by the eye? —He's done it on occasion in the past. You don't know just how conversant this man is with natural phenomena. . . . I responded distractedly, for my attention was focused on a mass of rocks covered with wild shrubs which nature had placed at the other end of the rugged mound. This mass was masked in turn by a closer rock that, separate from the first one, formed a channel through which flowed a torrent of water that, having completed its violent descent, broke into foam among detached rocks. . . . Well! I say to my *cicerone*: Go to the Salon, and you'll see that a fruitful imagination, aided by close study of nature, has inspired one of our artists to paint precisely these rocks, this waterfall, and this bit of landscape. —And also, perhaps, this piece of rough stone, and the seated fisherman pulling in his net, and the tools of his trade scattered on the ground around him, and his wife standing with her back to us. —You have no idea what a jokester you are, Abbé. . . . The space framed by the rocks in the torrent, the rugged embankment, and the mountains to the left contained a lake along whose shore we walked. From there we contemplated the whole of this marvellous scene; however, towards the part of the sky visible between the clump of trees on the rugged strip and the rocks with the two fishermen a wispy cloud was tossed by the wind. I turned to the Abbé: Do you believe in good faith, I said to him, that an intelligent artist could have done otherwise than place this cloud exactly where it is? Do you see that it establishes a new level of depth for the eye, that it signals expanses of space before and beyond it, that it makes the sky recede and makes other things seem closer? Vernet would have grasped all of this. Others, in darkening their skies with clouds, dream only of avoiding monotony, but Vernet wants his skies to have movement and magic like what's in front of us. —You can say Vernet, Vernet all you want, but I won't abandon nature to run after an image of it; however sublime a man might be, he's not God. —All right, but if you'd spent more time

with the artist, perhaps he'd have taught you to see in nature what you don't see now. How many things you'd find there that needed altering! How many of them his art would omit as they spoiled the overall effect and muddled the impression, and how many he'd draw together to double our enchantment! —What, you believe in all seriousness that Vernet would have better things to do than rigorously transcribe this scene? —I believe so. —Then tell me how he'd embellish it. —I don't know, and if I did I'd be a greater poet and a greater painter than he; but if Vernet had taught you to see nature better, nature, for her part, would have taught you to see Vernet better. —But Vernet will always remain Vernet, a mere man. —Yes, and all the more astonishing for that, and his work all the more worthy of admiration. The universe is a grand thing, without question, but when I compare it with the energy of the cause which generated it, what seems marvellous to me is that it's not still more beautiful and more perfect. It's quite otherwise when I reflect on the weakness of man, on his limited capacities, on the travail and brevity of his life, and consider certain things which he has undertaken and achieved. Abbé, may I put a question to you? Here it is: Which would you find the more remarkable, a mountain whose peak touched and held up the sky, or a pyramid covering several square miles and whose summit disappeared into the clouds? . . . You hesitate. It's the pyramid, my dear Abbé, and the reason is that nothing coming from God, the mountain's author, is astonishing, while the pyramid would be an incredible human phenomenon.

The conversation proceeded by fits and starts. Such was the beauty of the site that from time to time we were overcome with admiration; I spoke without paying much attention to what I was saying, and my listener was equally distracted; in addition, the Abbé's young charges ran from left to right and clambered up the rocks, such that their instructor was in perpetual fear of their becoming lost or falling or drowning in the lake. He advised that next time we should leave them behind at the house, but I disagreed with him.

I was inclined to linger on in this spot, spending the rest of the day there; but the Abbé having assured me that the country was so rich in such sites that we need not economize our pleasures in this way, I allowed myself to be led further on, though not without stealing a backward glance from time to time.

The youngsters went on ahead of their teacher, while I trailed behind him. We followed narrow, twisting paths, and I complained a bit about this to the Abbé, but he, having turned around, stopped directly in front of me and, looking me straight in the eye, said to me with considerable emphasis: Monsieur, the work of man is

sometimes more admirable than that of God! —Monsieur l'Abbé, I answered him, have you seen the *Antinous*, the *Medici Venus*, the *Callipygian Venus*, and other antique statues? —Yes. —Have you ever encountered figures in nature that were as beautiful, as perfect as those? —No, I can't say that I have. —Have your students never said things to you that evoked greater admiration and pleasure than the most profound sentence in Tacitus? —That has happened on occasion. —And how is that? —I'm deeply interested in them; their remarks seemed to me to indicate great sensibility, a kind of shrewdness and astute intelligence beyond their years. —Abbé, let's apply these observations. If I had a cup full of dice, and I emptied the cup, and they all landed showing the same number, would this astonish you? —Very much. —And if all the dice were loaded, would you still be astonished? —No. —Abbé, let's apply these observations. The world is but a heap of loaded molecules of infinite variety. There's a law of necessity that governs all the works of nature without design, without effort, without intelligence, without progress, and without resistance. If one were to invent a machine capable of producing paintings like Raphael's, would such paintings continue to be beautiful? —No. —And the machine? Should it become commonplace, it would be no more beautiful than the paintings. —But doesn't it follow from this that Raphael was himself such a machine? —Yes, it's true; but Raphael the machine was never commonplace; the productions of this machine were never as widespread and numerous as the leaves of an oak; but by a natural, almost irresistible inclination we attribute will, intelligence, purpose, and liberty to this machine. Suppose Raphael was eternal, fixed in front of the canvas, painting ceaselessly and of necessity. Imagine these machines to be everywhere, producing paintings in nature like the plants, trees, and fruit depicted in them, and tell me what would become of your admiration then. The beautiful order in the universe that you find so enchanting cannot be other than it is. Only one such order is known to you, the one you inhabit; you'll find it beautiful or ugly, according to whether the terms of your coexistence with it are agreeable or difficult; things would have to be quite otherwise than they are for it to seem equally beautiful or ugly independent of the pleasure or pain with which one lived in it. An inhabitant of Saturn transported to earth would feel his lungs dry up and would perish cursing nature; an inhabitant of earth transported to Saturn would feel choked, suffocated, and would perish cursing nature . . .

At this point a western wind sweeping across the landscape enveloped us in a thick, swirling cloud of dust. It momentarily blinded the Abbé, who rubbed his eyes. As he did this, I added: Although this cloud seems to you like a chaos of haphazardly

dispersed molecules, in fact, my dear Abbé, it's as perfectly ordered as the world . . . I was about to demonstrate my case to him, which he was hardly in a condition to enjoy, when the view of a new site, one no less admirable than the first, left me astonished and mute, my voice broken and my ideas thrown into confusion.

SECOND SITE

It was a view, to the right, of mountains covered with trees and wild shrubs—in shadow, as travelers would say, and in halftones, as artists would say. At the foot of these mountains, a passerby with his back to us, his walking stick on his shoulder, his things in a sack hanging from its end, hurried towards the same path along which we'd just come; he must have been in quite a hurry, for the beauty of the place didn't slow him down a bit. A rather wide path had been worn up the slope of these mountains. We ordered the youngsters to sit down and wait for us, and to make sure they didn't take advantage of our absence, the younger of them was instructed to learn two *Fables de Phèdre* by heart, and the older to prepare a summary of the first book of the *Georgics*; then we set about climbing this difficult path. Towards its summit we caught sight of a peasant with a covered wagon pulled by oxen; he was descending, and his animals held back from fear that the wagon might roll down on them. We left them behind us, penetrating further into a distant prospect well beyond the mountains we'd climbed, which had blocked it from our view. After a rather long walk we found ourselves on a kind of bridge, one of those audacious wooden constructions which genius, fearlessness, and human need have caused to be built in some mountainous areas. Pausing there, I let my glance play over my surroundings and I experienced a pleasure that made me tremble. How my companion would have revelled in the intensity of my astonishment, if only one of his eyes, still red and teary, were not causing him discomfort! He did, however, manage to say to me with marked irony: And Loutherbourg, and Vernet, and Claude Lorrain? . . . Before me, as from the summit of a precipice, I could see both sides, the center, the entirety of the striking scene, only portions of which I'd been able to take in from the foot of the mountains. At my back was an immense landscape which wouldn't have been foreseeable, save for my habit of estimating the distances between dispersed objects. The arches in front of me had, only a moment before, been under my feet; beneath these arches a wide torrent flowed noisily, its waters, interrupted and then

accelerated, hastening towards the beach at the furthest reaches of the site. I couldn't tear myself away from this spectacle and the mixture of pleasure and fear it evoked. However, I cross this long structure and find myself on the peak of a chain of mountains parallel to the first ones. If I had the courage to descend them, they'd bring me to the left side of the scene whose circuit I'd completed. It's true that I wouldn't have to move very far to avoid the burning sun and travel in the shade, for the light comes from beyond the chain of mountains on whose summit I am, which form with the ones I've just left a funnelled amphitheater whose far end is broken off, having been replaced by the wooden structure uniting the peaks of the two mountain chains. I advance, I descend, and after following a long and difficult course through brambles, thorns, plants, and thick bushes, I find myself on the left side of the scene. I continue along the bank of the lake formed by the waters of the stream to a point halfway between the two chains; I look about me, I see the wooden bridge at a prodigious height and a great distance. In front of this bridge I see the stream's waters arrested in their course by kinds of natural terraces; I see them fall into as many pools as there are terraces and form a marvelous waterfall; I see them arrive at my feet, spread out, and fill a vast reservoir. A loud noise causes me to look to my left; it's a waterfall emerging from the plants and bushes covering the top of a neighboring rock, falling into the stagnant waters of the stream. The lower reaches of these masses of rock, whose summits are bristling with plants, are carpeted with the greenest, softest moss. Closer to me, almost at the foot of the mountains to my left, a wide, dark cavern yawns. My excited imagination envisions at its entrance a young girl emerging with a young man; she has covered her eyes with her free hand, as if she feared the light and wanted to encounter the young man's gaze. These people weren't there, but close to me, on the bank of the large reservoir, was a woman resting with her dog at her side; and continuing along the same bank, to the left, on a small, slightly elevated beach, was a group of men and women such as an intelligent painter would have imagined them; further on, a standing peasant, facing me, and it seemed to me that he gave directions with his hand to the inhabitant of a distant canton. I was motionless, my glance wandered without pausing at any single object, my arms fell at my sides, and my mouth gaped. My guide respected my admiration and my silence; he was as happy and vain as if he were the owner or even the creator of these marvels. I won't tell you how long my enchantment lasted; the motionlessness of the people, the solitude of the place, its profound silence suspends time, nothing else exists, nothing is commensurable, man becomes as if eternal. However, with a bizarre impulse such as I sometimes have,

suddenly transforming the work of nature into a production of art, I cried out: How beautiful is all this, how grand, varied, noble, wise, harmonious, and vigorously colored! A thousand beauties dispersed throughout the universe have been brought together on this canvas without confusion, without effort, and linked together with exquisite taste. It's a fictional view one has to believe exists somewhere. If one were to imagine a vertical plane raised up on the peaks of these two mountain chains and sitting on the middle of this wooden structure, everything beyond this plane, in the distance, would be the portion of the composition which is brightly lit, and on this side of it, towards the foreground, would be all of its darkened, half-tinted portions; here all the objects one sees are clear, distinct, highly finished; they lack only direct light. Nothing is lost to me, for the closer objects are to me the more they're cast into shadow; and what depth the clouds between the sky and the wooden structure add to the scene! It's unprecedented, the space one imagines beyond this bridge, the furthest object that's visible. How sweet to taste the cool waters here, after having endured the heat prevailing in the distance! How majestic these rocks! How beautiful and true these waters! How remarkably the artist has created aerial perspective! . . . To this point, the dear Abbé had patiently heard me out; but when he heard this artist's expression, he pulled me by the sleeve and said, Are you raving mad? —No, not exactly. —What are you doing, talking about half-tints, planes, vigor, and coloring? —I substitute art for nature, the better to judge it. —If you pursue such substitutions often, you'll have a hard time finding beautiful paintings. —That may be, but you must agree that after such study the small number that I do admire will be worth the effort. —That's true.

Continuing our conversation and following the shore of the lake, we arrived where we'd left our two small disciples. Night was beginning to fall, and as we were worried about having enough daylight to retrace our steps to the château, we gained the other side, the Abbé hearing one of his students recite his two fables and the other his summary of Virgil; and as for myself, I recalled the places I was leaving behind, and resolved to describe them to you upon my return. My task was accomplished sooner than the Abbé's. At the verses

Vere novo, gelidus canis cum montibus humor
Liquitur, et Zephyro putris se gleba resolvit,¹²³

123 "In the dawning spring, when icy streams trickle from snowy mountains, and the crumbling clod breaks at Zephyr's touch": Virgil, *Georgics*, I, vv. 43-4.

I dreamt of the different charms of painting and poetry; of the difficulty of rendering into one language the passages one understands best in the other. On this theme, I recounted to the Abbé how once Jupiter suffered from a severe headache; the father of gods and men spent entire days and nights with his forehead in his hands, deep sighs emerging from his large chest. Both gods and men were keeping silent vigil around him, when suddenly he rose, screamed loudly, and a goddess, fully dressed and armed, was seen to emerge from his open mouth. It was Minerva. While the gods of Olympus celebrated Jupiter's deliverance and Minerva's birth, mankind set about admiring her. While there was general agreement as to her beauty, everyone had his own ideas about her clothing: the savage wanted to remove her helmet and breastplate, and gird her with a skimpy garment of greenery; the inhabitant of the Archipelago preferred her completely nude; that of Ausonia, more decent and fully clothed; the Asian maintained that the long folds of tunic clinging to her limbs and falling limply to her feet would be infinitely more graceful. The good, indulgent Jupiter had his daughter try on all these different garments, and all the representatives of mankind acknowledged that none suited her better than the one she'd worn when emerging from her father's head. The Abbé had little trouble figuring out my fable's meaning. We'd both found some passages by ancient poets tortuously difficult, and we grudgingly agreed that Tacitus was infinitely easier to translate than Virgil. The Abbé de La Bléterie¹²⁴ would disagree with us; however that might be, his Tacitus is no less bad, nor Desfontaines' Virgil any better.

We continued forward. The Abbé's irritated eye covered by a handkerchief and his soul scandalized by the temerity with which I'd proposed that a swirling cloud of dust whipped up by the wind, which had blinded us, was as perfectly ordered as the universe. The dust cloud seemed to him but a transitory image of chaos, one whose occurrence in the midst of the wonderful work that is creation was fortuitous. And he argued for this position. My dear Abbé, I said to him, forget for a moment the little piece of grit irritating your cornea, and listen to me. Why does the universe seem so well ordered to you? Isn't it because everything in it is linked, in its place, and there's not a single being whose position, production, and effect lack their sufficient reason, whether known or unknown to us? Should an exception be made for the west wind? Should an exception be made for grains of sand? For dust clouds? If all the forces influencing each of the molecules in the cloud that enveloped

¹²⁴ Jean-Philippe René de La Bléterie (1696–1772). Translator of the first six books of the *Annals* of Tacitus (1768).

us were known, a geometer would demonstrate to you that the one lodged between your eye and your eyelid is precisely where it ought to be. —But, said the Abbé, I'd prefer it to be elsewhere; I'm in pain, and the landscape we've left behind was giving me great pleasure. —And was that nature's bidding? Did she order up the landscape for you? —Why not? —If she ordered the landscape for you, she also ordered the dust cloud. Come, come, my friend, take yourself a little less seriously. We're all in nature, for better or worse, and bear in mind that those who sing nature's praises for having dressed the earth in green, a color soothing to the eyes, in spring, are impertinent souls who forget that this nature, whose benevolence they want to see everywhere in evidence, spreads a great white blanket over the countryside in winter which blinds us, makes us turn away our heads, and exposes us to possible death by freezing. Nature is beautiful and good when she's favorable to us, ugly and wicked when she torments us. A portion of her charms is often a reflection of our own efforts. —Here are some ideas that will take me very far. —That may be. —And would you advise me to instill them in my students? —Why not? I swear to you that I find them truer and less dangerous than others. —I'll consult with their parents about it. —Their parents are right-thinking people and will instruct you to teach their children dubious ideas. —But why? What motive could they have for filling the heads of these poor little creatures with stupidities and lies? —None, but they're irrational and pusillanimous.

THIRD SITE

I was beginning to feel exhausted when I found myself on the bank of a kind of sea cove. This cove was bordered on the left by a peninsula of precipitous terrain, its rocks covered by a rustic, luxuriant landscape. This landscape occupied a space between the shore on one side and, on the other, the cliff of a plateau which rose above the water. This long plateau paralleled the shoreline and extended far into the sea, which, liberated from this constraint at its far end, there opened out to its full expanse. This site also featured a château, military and Gothic in character. This was visible in the distance, at the end of the plateau. The upper reaches of the château culminated in an esplanade, and we could distinguish very easily the full length of its terrace, and, in the space between its small tower and the parapet, several people, some on the terrace, others on the

Spiritus intus alit, totamque infusa per artus
Mens agitat molem et magno se corpore miscet.²⁴⁷

"It is a spirit that resides within, that is diffused throughout the mass, that animates it, and that coalesces into the great whole." Not a word would need to be changed.

104. *Two Paintings:*
A Bridge with a Landscape of the Sabine below,
Forty Leagues from Rome (Pl. 21)
The Ruins of the Famous Portico of the Temple
of Baalbek in Heliopolis

Imagine a wooden bridge with two wide arches, prodigiously high and long; it extends from one side of the composition to the other and occupies the upper portion of the scene. Sever the bridge in the middle—if possible, without worrying too much about any vehicles traversing it. Descend from there, look through the arches into the distance, and you'll see, at some distance from the first bridge, a second stone bridge that cuts the background space in half, leaving an enormous distance between the two structures. Lift your eyes above this second bridge and tell me, if you know, what view you discover there. I won't tell you about the effect of this picture, I'll simply ask you on what size canvas you think it's painted. It's on a very small one, roughly two-thirds of a meter wide by less than half a meter high.

In its pendant, to the right there's a ruined colonnade; somewhat further to the left, in the foreground, an entire obelisk; then the door of a temple. On the other side of this door, an arrangement symmetrical to the first. In front of the ruin, a large stairway extending clear across its length on which one can descend from the temple door to the bottom of the composition. Weak, weak, lacking in effect. The first is a work of the imagination, while this one's an imitation of art; here one is interested only in the idea of the vanished power of the people who built such edifices; one doesn't reflect on the magic of the brush, but on the ravages of time.

105. *Ruin of a Triumphal Arch and Other Monuments*

The effect of these compositions, good and bad, is to leave you in a state of sweet melancholy. Our glance lingers over the debris of a

²⁴⁷ Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI, vv. 726–7; Diderot's rendering follows.

triumphal arch, a portico, a pyramid, a temple, a palace, and we retreat into ourselves; we contemplate the ravages of time, and in our imagination we scatter the rubble of the very buildings in which we live over the ground; in that moment solitude and silence prevail around us, we are the sole survivors of an entire nation that is no more. Such is the first tenet of the poetics of ruins.

To the right, a large, narrow structure, within whose mass a niche has been contrived, occupied by a statue; there are truncated columns to either side of the niche. Further to the left, towards the foreground, a soldier reclines on his belly on top of some stone blocks, the soles of his feet directed towards the structure to the right, his head facing left, from whence another soldier advances towards him, accompanied by a woman carrying a small child in her arms. Beyond, in the background, water is visible; beyond the water, towards the left, between some trees and the landscape, the crown of a ruined dome; further along, on the same side, a dilapidated, crumbling arcade; near this arcade, a column on a pedestal; around this column, shapeless piles of stones; beneath the arcade, a stairway leading to the shore of a lake; beyond, in the distance, a landscape; at the foot of the arcade, a figure; further forward by the water's edge, another figure. I won't characterize the figures, so negligently executed that one can't tell whether they're men or women, much less what they're doing; this is not the way to enliven ruins. Monsieur Robert, take greater care with your figures; make fewer of them, and make better ones; above all, study the spirit of figures like this, for they have their own specific character: a figure situated within ruins should differ from figures in other places.

106. *Large Gallery Lit from Its Far End*

What beautiful, sublime ruins! What decisiveness and at the same time what lightness, control, and facility with the brush! What an effect! What grandeur! What nobility! Don't tell me who owns these *Ruins*, for then I'll steal them, the only way for the poor to acquire such things. Alas! They probably induce little happiness in the rich idiot who owns them, while they'd make me so very happy! Owner, blind husband, what harm would I do you if I appropriated for myself charms of which you're unaware or that you neglect? With what astonishment, with what surprise I look at this severed arch and the weight it supports! Where are the people that erected this monument? What became of them? In what an enormous, dark, mute depth my eyes wander! How prodigiously far away seems the patch of sky I perceive through this opening! What an astonishing gradation of light! How it grows weaker as

it falls from the height of this arch onto the columns below! How these shadows seem threatened by the light in the foreground and background! One never tires of looking. Time stands still for those who admire. What a short time I've lived! How brief was my youth!

It's a large vaulted gallery whose interior is appointed with a colonnade extending from right to left. Towards the middle of its length the vault is shattered, revealing the debris of a superimposed structure through the hole. This vast, extensive structure is further illuminated through an opening at its far end. To the left, outside, one sees a fountain: above this fountain, an antique statue of a seated figure; beneath this statue's pedestal, a basin supported by a large stone block; around this basin, in front of the gallery, between the columns, a crowd of small figures, several small groups, and a variety of little scenes. Water is consumed, figures rest, walk about, converse . . . in other words, there's plenty of animation and noise. I'll tell you what I think about this elsewhere, Monsieur Robert, when the time comes. You are a gifted man, you will excel, you already excel in your genre; but study Vernet, learn from him how to draw, how to paint, how to make your figures interesting; and as you've committed yourself to the painting of ruins, be advised that this genre has its own poetics; you're completely innocent of it, acquaint yourself with it. You have the technique, but you lack the ideal. Don't you sense there are too many figures here, that three-quarters of them should be removed? Only those enhancing the effect of solitude and silence should be retained. A solitary man who's wandered into these shadowy precincts, his arms across his chest and his head inclined, would have made a greater impression on me; the darkness alone, the majesty of the building, the grandeur of the construction, the extent, serenity, and muted reverberation of the space, would have set me shuddering; I'd have been unable to prevent myself from dreaming under this vault, from sitting down between these columns, from entering into your painting. But there are too many intruders; I stop, I look, I admire, and I pass on. Monsieur Robert, you still don't understand why ruins give such pleasure, independently of the variety of accidents they manifest; so I'm going to tell you what would come into my head if I were on the spot.

The ideas ruins evoke in me are grand. Everything comes to nothing, everything perishes, everything passes, only the world remains, only time endures. How old is this world! I walk between two eternities. Wherever I cast my glance, the objects surrounding me announce death and compel my resignation to what awaits me. What is my ephemeral existence in comparison with that of a rock being worn down, of a valley being formed, of a forest that's dying,

of these deteriorating masses suspended above my head? I see the marble of tombs crumble into powder, and I don't want to die! And I begrudge the effect on weak tissue of fibers and flesh of a general law that even bronze can't contravene! A torrent drags each and every nation into the depths of a common abyss; myself, I resolve to make a solitary stand at the edge and resist the currents flowing past me.

If the site of a ruin seems perilous, I shudder. If I feel safe and secure there, I'm freer, more alone, more myself, closer to myself. It's there that I call out to my friend, it's there that I miss my friend; it's there that we'd enjoy ourselves without anxiety, without witnesses, without intruders, without those jealous of us. It's there that I probe my own heart; it's there that I interrogate his, that I take alarm and reassure myself. Between this place and the abodes of the city, the native ground of tumult, the seat of interest, passion, vice, crime, prejudice, and error, the distance is great.

If my soul were predisposed to tender feelings, I'd surrender to them without restraint; if my heart were calm, I'd savor the full sweetness of its quietude.

In this vast, solitary, deserted sanctuary, I hear nothing, I'm isolated from all life's difficulties; no one hurries me along and no one is within earshot; I can speak to myself out loud, give voice to my afflictions, and shed tears without restraint.

Beneath these dark arcades the modesty of a respectable woman would be less marked, the enterprise of a sensitive, timid lover more forward and courageous. Without our realizing it, we love everything that delivers us up to our inclinations, that seduces us and serves to excuse our weaknesses.

I would depart from the depths of this precinct and leave the importunate memory of the moment behind me there, a woman said, and she added:

If I were mistaken about this and melancholy brought me back there, I'd surrender completely to my pain. The secluded spot would ring out with my lamentations, the silence and the darkness would be rent with my cries, and when my soul had regained its composure I would dry my tears and my hands and return to the world of men, and they'd never suspect that I had wept.

If I should lose you, my soul's idol,²⁴⁸ if unforeseen death or some unexpected misfortune should take you from me, it is here that I would wish your ashes to be placed, and I'd come here to converse with your shade.

248 Louise-Henriette Volland, known as Sophie Volland (1716-84), the unmarried daughter of a French civil servant with whom Diderot had been in love since the mid-1750s.

If absence should separate us, I would come here in search of the same intoxication that had so completely and deliciously possessed our senses; my heart would palpitate with excitement; I would once more seek out and find voluptuous distraction. You would be present until the sweet languor, the sweet lassitude of pleasure had passed. Then I would rise, I would withdraw, but not without pausing a moment, not without turning my head, not without fixing my gaze on the spot where I was happy with you and without you. Without you? I'm mistaken, you were still present there, and on my return men will perceive my joy without being able to divine its cause. What are you doing at present? Where are you? Is there no cavern, no forest, no secret, isolated place where you, too, might wend your steps and give yourself over to melancholy?

Oh censor residing in the depths of my heart, you pursue me still. I was trying to evade your reproaches, yet it's here that you speak out most forcefully. Let us flee this place. Is it the sojourn of innocence? Of remorse? It is either, depending upon the soul one brings there. The wicked flee solitude, while just men seek it out. How at peace they are with themselves!

Artists' productions are differently perceived by those who've experienced the passions and by those innocent of them. To the latter they do not speak, but what is it they don't say to me? The former would never enter into the cavern I seek out, they'd bypass the forest into which I plunge with pleasure. What would they do there? They'd only become bored.

If I have something more to say about the poetics of ruins, Robert will bring it to mind.

The present work is the most beautiful of those exhibited. Its air is thick, its light heavy with the vapor of cool places and the droplets that strong shadows make visible; and then the brushwork is so tender, so sumptuous, so assured! Its wondrous effect is produced effortlessly. One doesn't think of art, one simply admires, and with the same admiration as that evoked my nature itself.

107. *Interior of a Ruined Gallery* Small oval

To the right, a colonnade; standing on the debris or remains of a collapsed vault, a man wrapped in his cloak; on a lower portion of the same structure, at the foot of this man, a seated woman resting. Below, in the corner, towards the interior of the gallery, a group of peasants, one of them carrying a jug on her head. In front of this group, only the heads of which are visible, a woman leading a horse.

The rest of the figures on this side are masked by a large pedestal supporting a statue. A jet of water flows from this pedestal into a large basin. Towards the further edge of this basin, a woman with a jug in her hand, a basket of wet laundry on her head, advancing towards an arcade opening onto the scene through which light falls on it. Beneath this arcade, a peasant advancing on his mount. Turning from there towards the left, ruined buildings, columns crumbling with old age, and a large stretch of old wall. The right side being lit by the light falling beneath the arcade, the left side is completely in shadow. At the foot of the large stretch of old wall, in the foreground, a peasant seated on the ground, relaxing on some straw he's gathered. And then masses of detached stones and other accessories common to the genre.

The remarkable thing about this work is the hot, undulating vapor visible above the arcade, an effect generated by the light captured, dispersed, and reflected by the curve of the vault.

108. *Small, Very Small Ruin*

To the right, the sloping roof of a shed set against a wall. Beneath this shed covered with straw, barrels, some of them evidently full and on their sides, others empty and upright. Above the roof, the remainder of the wall, damaged and covered with parasitic plants. To the extreme left, at the top of this wall, a bit of a columned balustrade in ruins. On this balustrade a pot of flowers. Adjacent to this structure, an opening or entry whose ramshackle door of planks is half open, perpendicular to the side of the structure supporting it. Beyond this doorway, another stone structure in ruins. Behind this, a third structure; in the background, a stairway leading to a vast expanse of water that follows its course and is perceptible through the opening between the two structures. To the left, a fourth stone structure facing the one on the right and perpendicular to those further back. On its façade, the crude figure of a saint in its niche; below the niche, a waterspout whose flow collects in a trough. On the wooden stairway descending to the river, a seated woman with her jug; at the trough, another woman washing. The upper portion of the structure to the left is also damaged and covered with parasitic plants. Once again, the artist has adorned its tip with a pot of flowers. Beneath this pot he's pierced a window, and to the wall on either side of this window he's attached rods on which sheets are drying. To the extreme left, the door of a house; within the house, leaning on the lower half of the door, a woman observing the activity in the street.