

The Neo-Academic Realm

Between Profession and Vocation in Nineteenth-Century France

Nathalie Heinich The usual arts in nineteenth-century France are dominated by a conflicting mixture of two systems. On the one hand the professional, official system, which had developed from the academic movement, on the other the vocational system, supported mainly by dealers and critics

To understand what is meant when we are discussing the artistic profession in the nineteenth century, it is necessary to define the two main meanings of the term 'professional'. The first meaning sees a professional as the opposite of an amateur or dilettante: viewed from this angle, the professional's activities are paid for rather than carried out free of charge, practical rather than speculative (they realize works rather than theorizing about them), specialized rather than encyclopaedic (they focus on a specific field rather than trying to address a wide range of issues), and are subject to collective norms rather than left to the arbitrary will of the individual (for instance, a professional scientist should be able to have an experiment repeated by someone else in order to validate a result).

The second meaning is a more technical one used by sociologists, particularly in the English-speaking world, where a professional is defined by means of a set of criteria chiefly

organized around the distinction between manual and intellectual activities: the trademark of a profession - or a liberal profession, as it would be called in France - is therefore that it is of a highly intellectual nature, and its skills have been acquired during specialized training within a system of theoretical teaching organized in a regular, uniform and stable manner (for instance, university studies in medicine or law). In that respect, contemporary writers are not strictly speaking, professionals: their practice is not sufficiently the result of collective learning and rules. Neither were painters and sculptors of the Middle Ages - they were seen as skilled craftspeople - whereas museum curators of today perfectly fit the definition of someone carrying out a professional activity.

Furthermore, the profession is practised within an associated structure, such as an academic institution, or the organizations of the medical or architectural professions. This structure is

based on expertise, imposes an ethical code on its members (for instance, the Hippocratic oath for doctors), and envisages a relationship of service (not a commercial transaction) in which the professional has authority over his clients. Thus a doctor can 'impose' a medicine upon a patient, whereas in former times a court painter had to satisfy his (or her) customers regarding the portrait that had been made.

From trade to profession

Given this definition, it appears that the first definition of professionalization is relevant for the liberal arts, such as writing, whereas the second one is relevant for the mechanical arts like painting and sculpture. The academic movement - that is the creation of academies dedicated to painting and sculpture in sixteenth-century Italy, in seventeenth-century France and then in the whole of Europe - meant a shift from trade to profession. Some artists claimed that they were no longer craftspeople, attached to the mechanical arts, but professionals, attached to the liberal arts. This new status progressively spread to all painters and sculptors, on the legal, institutional and social level, in such a way that in the eighteenth century the mechanical/liberal system was replaced by the beaux-arts system, a new categorization blurring the previous hierarchy and asserting the improved status of visual arts. At the time of the French Revolution, painting and sculpture were mostly practised as liberal professions, at least in the frame of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, which dominated the whole system after the suppression of the corporations and the victory of academicians over craftspeople.

This professional system was to last into the nineteenth century, when, after the suppression of the Académie Royale under the Revolution, in 1792, the academic institution resurfaced as

the Institut de France - a new name for a fairly similar body. Painting and sculpture formed one of its classes, that is specializations. However, several factors modified the situation in such a way that professionalism of the academic type proved increasingly inappropriate, and the result was that at the end of the century this neo-academic system - as I propose to call it - fell apart.

From profession to vocation

One of the major reasons for this collapse was the imposition of a numerus clausus on the Institut, a set number of members - a classical elitist system, allowing an increased selection of the happy few. Together with the stranglehold maintained by the Institut on the selection of works to be exhibited in its Salons (where the works of academicians were periodically exhibited), this meant that the artistic elite aged and ossified. It is thus meaningful that between 1803 and 1891, there were only 56 academicians painters (compare the former Académie Royale with its almost 500 members - painters, sculptors, draughtsmen, etchers); the total number of painters, sculptors and etchers comprising the fourth class of the Institut swung between 20 to 30 members annually (about 1 percent of the total numbers of practitioners). Also because of the numerus clausus there was the high average entrance age since the criteria for admission were very strict, requiring a lengthy career (Delacroix, for example, was admitted only at the end of his life, and after considerable difficulties, at the age of 53). And as for the Ecole des Beaux-Arts - the official training school, carrying on the tradition of teaching from the former academy - it was open to only a small number of students: about 120 per year (the same as for any college recruiting using a competitive system).

The members of the Institut were officially

authoritative figures, but their aesthetic prejudices (in particular the privilege given to history painting) were shared less and less by the majority of painters and art lovers. Under the circumstances there was no longer any institution recognized by the profession that could supervise artistic activities and offer protection. Compared with the centuries when art was a trade and the guilds fulfilled the function of guardian and supervisor, as also with the time when it was a profession and the Academy reigned supreme, in the nineteenth century artists no longer had any collective authority (neither a corporation, nor an open academy) representing their interests as a whole.

Another factor was the higher status of painting, which had been popularized in the eighteenth century by the opening of the Academic Salons at the same time as it acquired new dignity through academic liberalization. Beginning in the 1830s, painters joined poets in the new, Romantic world of the bohemian artist who existed on the fringes of bourgeois society. At this point the social background from which young artists were recruited changed, as they broke away from the world of trade to rise to a more middle-class environment - much to the displeasure of their parents, who wanted their children to avoid what they themselves still perceived as loss of social prestige.

Consequently, painting attracted more and more aspiring artists, and this demographic factor is of fundamental importance to an understanding of the tensions that marked the period. The *Journal des Artistes* stated that the number of French painters and sculptors had risen from 350 in 1789 to 2,159 in 1838, a six fold increase. According to some estimates, in the 1860s there were over 3,300 painters at work on the French market, in a system which initially concerned only 300 to 400 artists.

At the same time, technical innovations extended market opportunities. These innovations included painting on wood or china, interior decoration, lithography, caricatures, picturesque views sketched by artists on their travels, and artwork for newspaper advertisements. All this opened up outlets to painters newly embarking upon their careers, or those who had not yet made their mark, enabling them to earn a living despite the pressure of competition. That pressure, however, was increased by the invention of paint in tubes and prepared canvases, which came on the market in the 1840s. By abolishing the tedious manual labour of preparing pigments, and by allowing artists to paint out of doors, these innovations attracted other kinds of practitioners, amateur rather than professional.

Thus, in spite of the multiplication of opportunities, this blurring of the frontier between professionals and amateurs further increased the number of painters, intensifying competition and with it the chance of failure. From now on the institutional system proved inadequate to the demographic situation and the state of the market. The multiplication of the number of places where works were exhibited made this fact particularly evident in the 1880s, when there were a dozen or so societies organizing exhibitions in Paris. The official Salon thus lost its monopoly, an event that marked the end of the neo-academic system and ushered in a new organization of artistic life, one of a far more pluralistic and private nature - the merchant-critics systems, as Harrison and Cynthia White called it (White and White 1965; see also the review of this book by M. Westen, in this *Boekmancahier*).

Back to the neo-academic realm
The neo-academic system could thus be defined as a potentially conflicting mixture of two

systems: the professional, official system, which had developed from the academic movement, but in a form that became ossified, and the vocational system. The latter, far more informal and supported mainly by dealers and critics, allowed for the recognition of new concepts of artistic excellence, which emerged on the fringes of those networks that officially ratified works of art. The introduction of this third system, succeeding the earlier ideas of art first as a trade and then as a profession, was to produce yet another radical change in the status of artist in general. Henceforth the artist tended to be defined by the Romantic concept of the inspired individual, even the unappreciated genius, personified in the mind of the general public by the legendary figure of Vincent Van Gogh.¹ And it is within this system that most people still relate to the visual arts, although that relationship is at present undergoing a crisis among artists, one of the symptoms of which, as it happens, is a call - part nostalgic, part utopian - for the professionalization of artistic activity.

Between the 'professional' and the 'vocational' realms, I have termed this nineteenth-century situation 'neo-academic', in that it borrowed its structure from the previous academic system but within a specific form and in a context which could not but foster its rigidity. This realm was a mixture between a very closed institutional organization, for a small number of privileged practitioners, and a rather informal, unprotected and open status, for the mass of the other painters. It thus combined an institutional protectionism with a legal and social liberalism, in a context of strong competition due to the discrepancy between the many who wanted to practice the visual arts and the limited possibilities of the public and private markets.

Characteristic of the nineteenth century was

this conflicting juxtaposition of the established system and its Romantic or vocational contests. To understand what was at stake, one should have in mind the coexistence of two realms, the new one - still relevant today - being unsystematic and difficult to perceive as such. This paradoxical mixture of hyper-norm (the academic professionalism) and of anomy (the romantic vocation) becomes intelligible only if one thinks in terms of generational strata (after the Revolution of 1789, after 1830, after 1848, after the Commune, the Third Republic), as well as in terms of categories of actors (mundane artists, failed artists, modern artists, unknown artists...) and in terms of artistic movements (Academism, Romanticism, Realism, Impressionism, Symbolism). It is a complex situation, with multiple articulations, but I hope I have succeeded in showing its deep underlying coherence, despite its internal contradictions.

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Note

1. Vincent Van Gogh was a typical 'vocational' painter (Heinich 1996).

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