CASE STUDY 3

Charles Le Brun, 'art dictator of France'

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Introduction

> For twenty years he remained the art dictator of France, and as such he became the real creator of the 'academicism' to which French art owed its world fame.
> (Hauser, *Social History of Art*, vol.2, p.182)

Arnold Hauser's comment represents a common view of the career of Charles Le Brun (1619–90), First Painter (from 1661) to King Louis XIV of France, Rector (from 1665) and then Director (from 1683) of the Académie royale (Plate 57). It is often claimed that Le Brun used his position of influence to dictate the subjects and styles of contemporary art. As First Painter to the king, his role was to attend to important royal commissions and advise the king on artistic matters. In the same way that the rule of Louis XIV (Plate 58) was 'absolute' (that is, there were few curbs or checks on his power as head of church and state), so the 'reign' of Le Brun is often seen as one in which artistic independence was suppressed by his attempts to establish and enforce universal laws or standards for art. His regime left little scope for democratic debate or individual expression. The dangers of his regime were exacerbated by the fact that the main form of patronage for artists at the time was that of the royal court, exercised through its control over the Académie.

The issue is of importance for more recent analyses of art because it touches on the vexed question of the relationship between paintings and the institutional frameworks in which they were created. From the nineteenth century onwards, great value has been attached to personal expression, freedom and individual creativity in art. In such a climate, Le Brun's paintings can appear too highly institutionalized. They seem to emerge too directly from the rules and standards of taste sanctioned by the Académie in the seventeenth century. According to Pierre Vaisse, the idea of Le Brun's art dictatorship dates back precisely to the period when the term 'academic' took on pejorative connotations, around 1800.[1] Such connotations usually include the excessively erudite, the formulaic, the idealized and the unthinking, élitist transmission of 'high' culture. Those who visit Le Brun's works in the Louvre, however, will appreciate how modern taste can respond to their grandeur, if not their subject-matter and technique. At the time of writing, visitors can experience a separate space in the Louvre in which they are surrounded by the massive canvases of Le Brun's Alexander series, some of the paintings being over twelve metres wide and four metres high.

Plate 57 N
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[1] Vaisse, 'L'esthétique XIXe siècle'. Vaisse explains how the terms 'academic' and 'official' were closely associated in nineteenth-century discourse, thus emphasizing the academies' perceptions of themselves as centres of state power.

Plate 57 Nicolas de Largillierre, *Charles Le Brun*, 1686, oil on canvas, 232 x 187 cm. Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

Plate 58 Hyacinthe Rigaud, *Louis XIV*, 1701, oil on canvas, 277 x 194 cm, Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

In this study we'll be investigating the accuracy of Hauser's view of Le Brun and of his influence by looking at examples of the works he produced and the theories he expressed. He devoted much of his attention to decorating Louis's royal residences, including the Palace of Versailles; he was asked to work on this after Louis had seen and envied Le Brun's magnificent decorations at Vaux-le-Vicomte, a chateau built for the Finance Minister, Fouquet. Le Brun's royal service took many other forms. He often accompanied Louis to his war camps and battle sites, for example, in order to make studies for paintings celebrating the king's campaigns. In an address to the Académie royale, Louis said, 'I entrust to you the most precious thing on earth – my fame.' We can gain some idea of Le Brun's role as royal flatterer by looking at Plate 59, *The King Governs Alone*. This is a ceiling painting executed by Le Brun between 1679 and 1684 for the Hall of Mirrors of the Palace of Versailles (Plate 60). Le Brun was in charge of the decoration of the palace and supervised a large team of artists and craftsmen who made tapestries, paintings, sculptures, ornaments and furniture as decorative ensembles. He also did many paintings himself.

In the painting we see Louis XIV, dressed in antique style, sitting in splendour on his throne (near lower edge as we view the reproduction). He looks towards a figure representing Glory who holds the royal crown; she is next to winged figures carrying trumpets, symbols of renown. Louis is surrounded by a host of allegorical figures[2] and objects emphasizing the qualities and achievements

[2] Figures which stand for abstract qualities or attributes. Objects, actions and narratives can also have allegorical significance due to their historical and cultural associations.

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Hall of Mirro

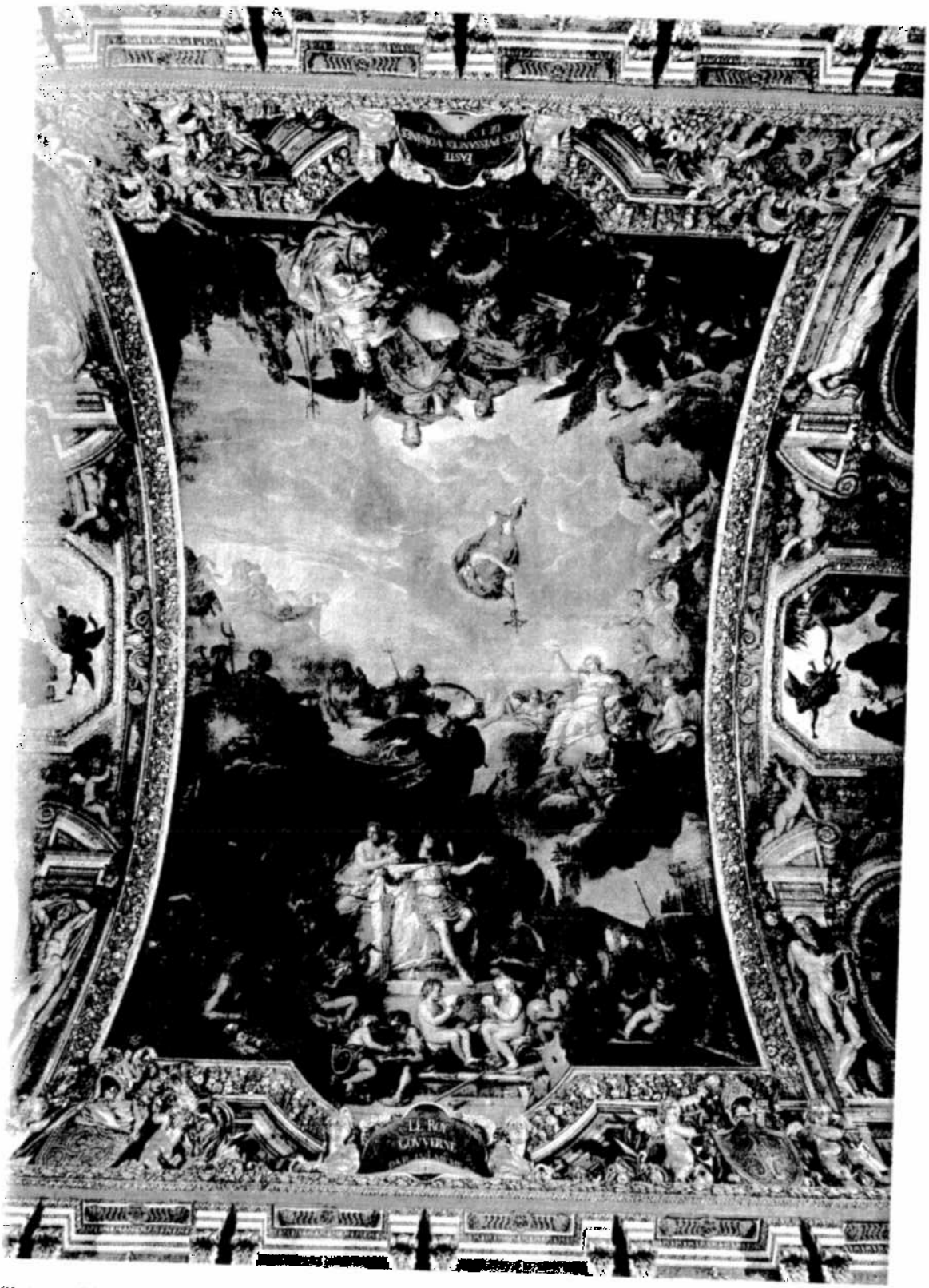

Plate 59 Charles Le Brun, *The King Governs Alone*, 1679–84, oil painting of central vault, ceiling of the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

Plate 60 Hall of Mirrors, Versailles. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

of his reign and country: Flora, goddess of flowers and fruitfulness (to the left of Louis) wearing her belt of flowers; Peace, carrying a cornucopia of flowers, to the left of Flora; Ceres, goddess of agriculture (in the lower left edge), wearing her traditional crown of ears of corn. The female figure (bottom left-hand corner) whose robes and shield are decorated with the fleur-de-lis, the French royal coat of arms, holds an olive branch representing peace and stands for the nation itself. Elsewhere there are references to commerce, agriculture, war and manufacturing: a pot of gold, pitchforks, spears and hammers, as well as objects and activities signifying everyday life – card games and musical instruments, for example.

The message is fairly clear: Louis inhabits the realm of the gods. Although Time, with his customary hourglass and scythe (the latter signifying death – the 'grim reaper'), flies above Louis's head, Louis is only partly mortal. These pagan references to Louis's divine status carried particular significance in Catholic France. It had been believed for some time that the monarchs of France ruled by divine right as God's representatives on earth. The strong union of state and Catholic Church in seventeenth-century France reinforced the 'heavenly' status of kings.

As Director of the Académie royale, Le Brun could influence both its teaching programme and its precepts: he could steer pupils and academicians towards priorities of style and subject-matter, both in his recommendations about which past masters should serve as models and in the formal resolutions passed at meetings and lectures. In this way he was at the centre of attempts to establish and transmit an artistic canon in late seventeenth-century France. I am using the word 'canon' in two senses here: first, as a body of works to which the highest value is attached within a particular society and, second, as a set of rules or principles which help to define such works as canonical. As we saw in the Preface (p.12), the word 'canon' can be defined as a general rule, principle or standard, as well as a set of authoritative works or texts. In other words, Le Brun wanted to establish a set of principles and practices which would be regarded as the norm for all those aspiring to produce high art, and as a touchstone against which the value of art and artists of all kinds

could be measured. The principles of high art established by Le Brun were intended to influence artists of his own and subsequent generations.

The broad aims of this study are to look at the way in which Le Brun's art and theory established an artistic canon within the framework of a powerful, state-supported institution and to examine Hauser's claim that this canon was developed and enforced in a dictatorial way. Its specific objectives are to enable you to begin to sketch out answers to the following questions:

1 How did the Académie royale provide an appropriate context for the canonization of art and artistic principles?
2 What artistic principles did Le Brun wish to establish as canonical?
3 Was Le Brun's canon really a form of dictatorship, as Hauser implies?

You have already seen, in the studies on Poussin and the Parthenon marbles, how a classical tradition derived from antique art was transmitted to seventeenth-century artists through the efforts and achievements of their Renaissance predecessors. Like Poussin, Le Brun inherited and revised this western canon or 'gold standard'. But was this at the cost of artistic freedom?

L'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture (Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture)

The foundation in Paris of the Académie royale in 1648 was the result of artistic rivalry, commercial competition and the desire to follow the example of Rome, where there was already an academy for artists, the Accademia di S. Luca (Academy of Saint Luke, the patron saint of painters). Essentially, the Académie royale was formed in response to a bid for greater power by the Maitrise, an artists' guild founded in 1391 which demanded from its members payment of dues and respect for its trade regulations. Members of the Maitrise had become increasingly concerned about the growing numbers of artists who escaped its regulations by obtaining royal commissions. Those artists who obtained such commissions were known as *brevetaires*, as they obtained from the monarch a *lettre de brevet* offering legal protection and exemption from the regulations of the Maitrise. There were other fringe benefits, such as free accommodation in royal buildings, including the Louvre (at the time a royal palace). Guildsmen resented such privileges as well as the diminishing opportunities to secure for themselves lucrative royal commissions.

The conflict between guildsmen and *brevetaires* was enmeshed in a wider political struggle of the first half of the seventeenth century between the monarchy and the Parlement, France's supreme court of appeal, which was dominated by disillusioned aristocrats who mounted a challenge to royal power in a series of armed conflicts known as the Fronde. The Parlementaires backed the Maitrise, and as they gained the upper hand in the power struggle, they tried to restrict the privileges and commissions of the *brevetaires*. Le Brun launched a counter-attack. He moved in circles of artists and enthusiasts of the arts who admired the Accademia di S. Luca for its teaching methods and for the tradition of great art, based on the example of ancient Greece and Rome, which it aspired to transmit. As Mazarin (Principal Minister to the Crown) and Anne of Austria, then Regent of France, regained ascendancy in the struggle for power, Le Brun's proposal to establish in Paris an academy

modelled on that of Rome won royal support. Members of the Maitrise were forbidden to interfere in any way in the running of this new academy.

The founding members of the Académie royale were not all practitioners of the most intellectual kind of art – morally serious history painting – but the institution as a whole made its mission the redefinition of the status of art, so that it should be considered a liberal art of the same intellectual status as epic poetry or ancient rhetoric.[3] There was a conscious attempt to remove painting and sculpture from their origins in craft practices and to shape artists into gentleman scholars. Theory and learning were to be more important than practical experience. Unlike the guildsmen, members of the Académie royale were not allowed to involve themselves directly in the commercial trading of their works, since retailing and trade of any kind carried a social stigma at this time. They were not entitled, by law, to keep shops – or even to display works in their studio windows. Nor did they establish any equivalent of the banquets and festivities which had characterized membership of the Maitrise. Academicians were advised instead to follow the loftier intellectual example of Rome, in which practical aspects of painting were elevated by a knowledge of history, mythology and literature in order to produce grand history paintings. The Académie royale was granted exclusive rights to hold life drawing classes so that it could emulate the life drawing classes which had distinguished the Accademia di S. Luca.[4] As a result, this became an area of expertise denied henceforth to the more 'lowly' guildsmen, with their essentially 'craft' practices based on apprenticeship served with a master and learning a trade through following practical example.

In order to transmit artistic skill and learning, the Académie royale familiarized its students with a body of great works of art produced by Italian Renaissance masters. In other words, a major function was the teaching and perpetuation of a canonical body of art – canonical in the sense that it was judged to be the best by the most influential opinion formers of the day. Emphasizing its role as transmitter of a great artistic tradition (initially at least) in the hope of alienating those members of the Maitrise whose interest in art was of a less intellectual kind, it established regular lectures (*conférences* in French) which were open to lay spectators as well as to its own full and student members. Le Brun inaugurated the series of lectures on 7 May 1667 with a commentary on Raphael's *Saint Michael*.

Based on close analyses of paintings in the royal collection, these lectures played a crucial role in teaching and in establishing a particular way of defining the priorities of artists. They strengthened the notion that art was a learned occupation informed by critical doctrine and knowledge of literature, the Bible and history. The lectures were followed by discussions which led in turn to the passing of formal resolutions on artistic practices and principles. Students and other members came away with academic 'policy' on line, light

[3] The liberal arts were traditional branches of learning which included rhetoric and poetry. Since antiquity, painting and sculpture had been classified as 'mechanical' rather than 'liberal' arts. The mechanical arts were so called because they were taught by practice and did not entail theory or scholarship (required by the liberal arts). Barker *et al.*, *The Changing Status of the Artist* (Book 2 in this series), discusses the liberal arts in more detail.

[4] You will find a discussion of the traditions and conventions of life drawing classes in European academies in Perry, *Gender and Art* (Book 3 in this series).

and study the proportions of the human figure, colour, expression and so on. They also had classes in perspective and anatomy. This was all part of the attempt to intellectualize art. We shall look later at one of the lectures delivered by Le Brun.

The Académie royale was a bastion of hierarchical structures. Membership was defined in accordance with a strict ranking of pupils, probationary academicians, academicians, teachers (professors) and directors. There were further subdivisions of (in descending order of rank) officers, councillors and ordinary members. Officers were the only ones entitled to the rank of professor and were usually history painters. Rank and status even determined the kind of seat upon which one was allowed to sit at meetings. Advancement to full membership was by submission of a suitable work, a 'reception piece'. The status of members was also affected by their choice of subject-matter. Throughout its history the institution protected such hierarchies through a deferential learning process and the award of prizes (for example, a scholarship to Rome) which rewarded those whose work best exemplified the current orthodoxy of style and subject-matter. André Félibien (1619–95), an architect and biographer who was appointed *amateur honoraire* (honorary expert or consultant), transcribed a number of the lectures delivered to the Académie royale in 1667. The appointment was conferred by Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619–83), Minister of Fine Arts (and later of Finance) to Louis XIV. In his preface to the *Conférences de l'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture pendant l'année 1667* (Lectures of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture for the Year 1667) (1668), Félibien established the general principle that representation of the human figure – particularly in historical, mythological or religious narratives or in allegorical compositions – was the highest form of artistic endeavour and the greatest test of the liberal, intellectual qualities which distinguished art from manual craft.[5]

By the end of the seventeenth century the hierarchical codification of the genres, in the sense of categories of subject-matter, was well established. They were, in descending order:

1. history (including religious, historical, literary or mythological narratives, sometimes of an allegorical nature, as well as studies of individual sacred persons such as saints or the Virgin Mary)
2. portraiture (the higher the status of the sitter, the higher that of the portrait)
3. genre (in the sense of scenes from everyday life – this term only came into formal use in the eighteenth century)
4. landscape
5. still life.

History painting was regarded as the highest of the genres because it required the greatest modification of observable nature or 'reality'. It was felt that landscape and still life, in their most common form, called for relatively little imaginative transformation.

The Académie royale was ruled by a complex bureaucracy, and this bureaucratic trend intensified in 1664 when Colbert assumed power as Minister of Fine Arts. Colbert and Louis XIV brought about a situation in

[5] An extract from Félibien's preface is included in Edwards, *Art and its Histories: A Reader*.

which the court, from its bases in Paris and Versailles, became the main sources of artistic patronage. They intervened directly in matters of art and culture. We can see, then, how Le Brun's position as teacher and Director at the Académie royale would have placed him in the ideal position to reinforce the institutionalization of art practice and theory. The Académie's mission and educational programme placed it at the centre of attempts to transmit an institutionally defined canon of artistic production and values. And these values had to be acceptable to the monarchy.

The canon according to Le Brun

The principles embodied in Le Brun's own work

Please look at Plate 61, *The Queens of Persia at the Feet of Alexander* (also known as *The Tent of Darius*). This is the first of a series of paintings in which Le Brun depicted the main events of the life of Alexander the Great (in the pink plumed helmet), the hero of ancient Greece who conquered lands in the Middle East and beyond. The scene takes place on the day after Alexander's victory at the battle of Issus in the fourth century BCE. After a night of victory celebrations he visits the family of his defeated enemy, Darius, King of Persia. Darius himself has fled, for fear of being killed, leaving his family in his camp. It was traditional for victors to claim the wives and families of their enemy, but Alexander is much more magnanimous in his conduct. He is accompanied by his friend, Hephaestion (to the left of Alexander), who wears his traditional crimson cloak. According to legendary accounts, some members of Darius's family mistook Hephaestion for Alexander until a eunuch informed them of their mistake. Alexander reassured them, in their embarrassment, by saying, 'You have not made a mistake, for he too is Alexander.' Sisygambis, Darius's mother, leads the group of women and bows down before Hephaestion, apparently oblivious to Alexander. Alexander looks at Stateira, Darius's wife, who holds her son Ochus in front of her. Beside Stateira are Darius's two young daughters. The other figures include handmaidens and eunuchs, one prostrate on the ground, head in the dust.

The main aim of the history paintings of Le Brun and his contemporaries was to tell a story as eloquently and explicitly as possible. Paintings can't often describe precisely the kind of *sequence* of events I've just outlined, but good narrative paintings contain their own devices for relating a *particular moment* or *series of moments* within a story, even if their exact sequence is not clear.

Study closely *The Tent of Darius* (Plate 61) and say how the following aspects of Le Brun's painting help to tell the story: (1) the poses and gestures of the figures; (2) facial expression; (3) composition (in particular, the way in which the figures and their gazes are arranged).

Analysing the composition of a painting involves looking at the way in which all of its elements – figures, figure groups, objects, colours, light and shade, background, middle ground and foreground, scale and perspective – are arranged within the canvas. This gives us an idea about how an artist has used the total space available, about how an impression of depth and distance is created, and about the patterns, juxtapositions and contrasts which catch

Plate 61 Charles Le Brun, *The Queens of Persia at the Feet of Alexander* (also known as *The Tent of Darius*), 1660–1, oil on canvas, 298 x 453 cm, Musée Nationale, Versailles (first placed in the *grand cabinet* of the king at the Tuileries). Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

our eye. In this case, you might find it helpful to know that, in order to make a composition expressive or effective, artists of this period often tried to guide the viewer's eye along lines or avenues of sight. It's often useful, when studying a painting's composition, to draw lines which trace the visual pathways and structural shapes within it. In this case, trace the lines following the direction of gaze of some of the main figures, as well as the line made by moving from one head to the next of the bending figures. Read the discussion below *after* you have made your own notes on these aspects of the painting: it's always important to base interpretation on first-hand observation. You'll then be in a better position to assess the force of some of the other judgements on the story-telling aspects of Le Brun's painting to which I'll refer.

Discussion

1 The poses of the figures are obviously highly significant. Alexander and Hephaestion are straight and upright in keeping with their 'manly' heroic status, while the women and servants are posed in varying degrees of prostration, indicating their subservience. We can imagine Alexander's open arms as a gesture of noble forgiveness and humility, as he claims his friend must share his greatness. All heads are turned towards the

heroes, and hands are used to express surprise (see the figure bottom left), anxiety (the woman on the extreme right) and supplication. Both Stateira and Ochus seem to plead for mercy. One of Darius's daughters joins her hands together to plead for mercy, while the other wipes her eyes. The prostrate pose of the eunuch perhaps expresses his desperation: he has no royal rank with which to bargain. In attributing significance to poses and gestures in this way, I am using an interpretative argument based loosely on knowledge of social conventions and on observation of human behaviour.

2 If we now turn to the faces, we can see how varied they are in the profiles they present and particularly in the direction of gaze, degree of openness of the eye, and position of the eyebrow. I will return to the whole issue of facial expression in general (and eyebrows in particular) at a later stage, but wish to note now the way in which these faces seem to express a whole range of emotions, from gentleness (Alexander) to pleading (Stateira), astonishment (the figure top right) and fear (the daughter of Darius on the right). Along with the poses and gestures, facial expressions help us to know more about what's going on in the story and how the 'characters' are reacting.

3 The arrangement of the figures helps us to sort out what's going on. Alexander and Hephaestion stand facing the crowd so that we can see clearly what impression each group makes on the other. Many of the eyes of the family group lead our eyes to the two main heroes. There is a triangular figure grouping, which was a conventional means of achieving a stable, neatly edged, self-contained and solid compositional effect. You can see this by tracing a diagonal line linking the heads of the top row of figures starting from the right-hand edge down to the prostrate Sisygambis in the yellow cloak. Then trace another line from Sisygambis linking the knees of the kneeling figures on the bottom row to the right-hand edge. Along with the vertical line of the painting's right-hand edge, these lines form a triangular shape. Finally, the glimpse of sky in the top left-hand corner alleviates the gloom of the rest of the painting and makes Hephaestion stand out more clearly.

It's interesting to see how one of Le Brun's contemporaries interpreted the episode depicted by the artist. André Félibien reflected on the eloquence of Alexander's gestures:

> There are four different actions evident in his gestures. His compassion towards the princesses is apparent both in his bearing and the look of his eye. His open hand reveals his clemency and is a perfect expression of the mercy he shows to the entire court. His other hand resting on Hephaestion shows that the latter is his favourite or, rather, an incarnation of himself, and his left leg, which is pulled back, is a mark of the civility he shows towards the princesses. The painter did not have him bending forward any further because he is depicting him at the moment when he approaches the women, and it was not a Greek custom; moreover, he could not bend over much further due to a thigh injury he had sustained in the last battle.
>
> (Félibien, *Les Reines de Perse aux pieds d'Alexandre, peinture du Cabinet du Roy*, quoted in Gareau, *Charles Le Brun*, p.199)

For Félibien, then, the poses and gestures painted by Le Brun were part of a highly legible code. In 'decoding' them he drew on a combination of knowledge of social conventions (Alexander's bearing), historical accuracy ('it was not the Greek custom') and traditional symbolism (the open hand representing clemency). Félibien was very familiar with the work of 'great' painters past and present, as is indicated by the title of his *Conversations on the Lives and Works of the Most Excellent Painters, Ancient and Modern* (1666–88).[6] Félibien may also have had in mind the conventions of the court behaviour of his own time, but we would need to discover much more about such behaviour before establishing this link with the painting. Would Louis XIV use similar gestures of clemency in similar circumstances? This is perhaps the implication. Louis had specifically commissioned a painting on the subject of Alexander, and Le Brun had worked on it at the king's palace at Fontainebleau. It was completed in Paris and hung in the king's *grand cabinet* (a rather grand public office or study) at the Tuileries before being transported to Versailles. On the strength of this painting, Le Brun was nominated First Painter to the King.

In trying to decide whether Alexander is displaying the symptom of a gammy leg or social graces recognizable to the court and high society of his day, it is useful to consider the seventeenth-century social category of the *honnête homme*. This phrase is untranslatable but approximates to 'gentleman'. It conveyed honesty, decency and good breeding, and was commonly used in the literature written and read by Le Brun's contemporaries:

> It was in the *salons* [informal gatherings, based on dinner and conversation, hosted by society ladies] that the new ideal of the gentleman, the *honnête homme*, was formed; the rough-mannered warrior was replaced by the gentleman, distinguished for his refinement, good taste, and politeness towards the ladies. Needless to say, the *honnête homme* was a thoroughly aristocratic ideal; in the literature of the time ... the nobleman, polished and refined by the *salons* through contact with the fair sex, is contrasted with the dull bourgeois.
>
> (Lough, *Introduction to Seventeenth-Century France*, pp.225–6)

Alexander represents a battlefield version of this ideal. He is certainly 'polite towards the ladies' (the Greek essayist Plutarch (*c.*46–*c.*126 CE) had called him 'honourable and princely'), and the cultural resonances and circumstances of patronage of this work would seem to suggest some kind of affinity with the courtly standards of behaviour to which Louis XIV himself might adapt when leaving the rough battlefield. This, at any rate, is the image of royal power offered by Le Brun. Contemporary court culture could inflict severe social penalties on those who ignored the social code. Perhaps, however, Alexander transcends the ideal of the *honnête homme* in order to express a kind of heroic magnanimity? Whatever our response to Alexander, it is worth pointing out that it was a commonplace of contemporary literature (at least in the earlier part of Louis's reign) to make comparisons between

[6] Félibien is generally considered to represent the more orthodox views of late seventeenth-century academicians, even though some accused him of being less than accurate in his transcriptions of Académie lectures and discussions. One of his aims was to provide an approved way of viewing paintings (for example, focusing on expression, pose and narrative detail).

the Macedonian hero[7] and Louis XIV. In his choice of subject for the painting, Louis was no doubt influenced by other representations of kingly attributes. For example, at the age of seven he had seen a contemporary play by Gillet de la Tessonerie entitled *L'Art de regner ou le sage gouverneur* (The Art of Ruling or the Wise Governor) in which Alexander had personified the kingly virtue of continence: having fallen in love with Stateira, he surrendered her to her lover.[8] Louis perhaps wished artistic representations of himself to construct a particular (propagandist) public image.

Le Brun's pictorial values

Let us now compare Le Brun's work and that of an earlier artist, Paolo Caliari Veronese (1528–88), a painter of mythological and religious subjects (many in fresco form) well known to seventeenth-century artists. In this way we will be able to explore the special nature of the pictorial values exemplified by Le Brun. Before embarking on this exercise, it is important to know that Veronese was held by commentators on art from the Renaissance onwards to represent a set of pictorial values which placed dazzling colour and texture above the more 'intellectual' aspects of line and composition. The Roman school of painting to which Raphael had belonged was felt to uphold the claims of this more linear, intellectual strand of Renaissance art, while Veronese and the Venetian school in general were considered to place more emphasis on pleasing the eye and the senses of the beholder. Things were, of course, less clear cut than this but, as with many cultural and political debates, commentators simplified and polarized the issues for propagandist value, as well as enabling artists and public alike to determine where their own priorities lay.

Compare Le Brun's *Tent of Darius* (Plate 61) with Veronese's *Family of Darius before Alexander* (Plate 62). What differences can you see (1) in the use of colour; (2) in the use of ornamental detail; and (3) in the backgrounds or settings used?

A few tips: when thinking about the approach to colour and ornamental detail, you might like to consider how bright and well lit these paintings seem to be. How much 'dazzle', 'glitter' and pattern does each work contain and emphasize? You might also like to think about colour temperature and its effects. If you look at Plate 63 you can see how colours have traditionally (and scientifically) been classified as warm or cool. All other things being equal, warm colours seem to advance towards us, while cooler colours give the impression of receding away from us. Do both artists exploit such possibilities?

[7] Macedonia was a Slav region of south-eastern Europe which, under Philip II, conquered Greece. Philip's son Alexander spread Greek culture throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

[8] Posner ('Charles Le Brun's *Triumphs of Alexander*', pp.241–2) thinks this might have had a personal resonance for Louis XIV, who was forced to give up his mistress, Marie Mancini, in order to fulfil his political duty to marry the Spanish Infanta Maria Theresa.

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Plate 62 Paolo Veronese, *The Family of Darius before Alexander*, 1565–70, oil (identified) on canvas, 236 x 475 cm, National Gallery, London. Reproduced by courtesy of The Trustees, The National Gallery, London.

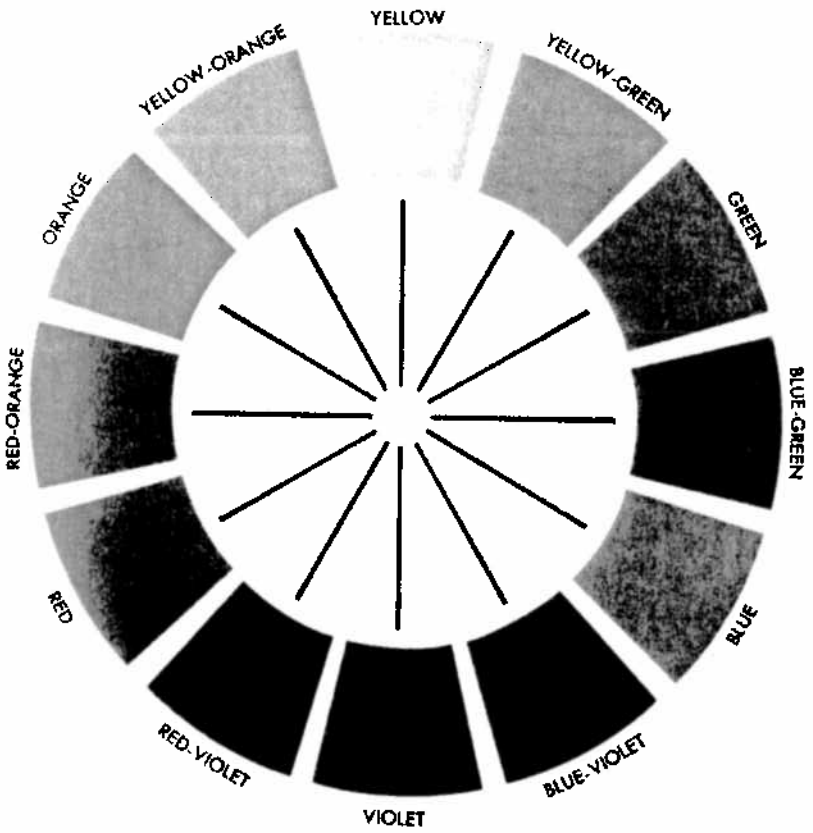

Plate 63 Colour wheel showing warm colours (reds and oranges) and cool colours (blues and greens). Adapted from Plate 1 of Faber Birren, *Principles of Color*, 1969, New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Discussion

1 The light in Le Brun's painting doesn't fall on what *could* be the most vibrant colours – the reds, yellows and oranges, all warm colours which, if well lit, might have seemed as if they were 'advancing' towards the viewer. Instead it seems to travel from a point in front of and to the right of the foreground figures, to fall on the cool blues and whites of Stateira and her daughters. Le Brun seems to have muted his colours in order to soften them. Apart from the patches of relatively bright crimson on Hephaestion and the prostrate eunuch, there is little vibrancy of colour to grab or direct our attention here. In Veronese's painting there is no playing down of the vitality and sumptuous nature of colour. While Le Brun's colours are dulled by the relative darkness into which they are cast, Veronese's are thrown into relief against a neutral background.

   (I don't expect you to have made this point, but it is interesting to note that Veronese juxtaposes complementary colours (red and green, yellow and violet) so that each colour appears brighter and stronger. Complementary colours are primary colours – red, blue and yellow – placed next to the secondary colour made from the other two primaries – red with green, blue with orange, yellow with violet. Their juxtaposition creates strong contrasts. The warm reds of the heroes' costumes (Alexander and Hephaestion on the right) make the two principal figures advance towards us, particularly as they are placed more or less on the picture plane.[9] Imagine how different the effect would be if these costumes were grey or black.)

2 Le Brun's painting also lacks 'dazzle' in its treatment of ornamental detail – the armour of Alexander and Hephaestion, the brocade of the tent and the women's costumes. Although these ornamental or decorative details are quite intricate and reflect the social standing of their owners, they are not generally brightly lit: the eye must not distract the mind. Contrast the celebration of the ornamental and textural qualities of silk, fur and armour in Veronese's painting.

3 The setting of Veronese's painting is almost like a theatre backdrop. Instead of Darius's tent we now see his palace. (You won't know this, but Veronese's Venetian patrons, the Pisani, had connections with the sixteenth-century architect Palladio, who designed buildings in the elevated classical style shown in the palace. The artist may have been flattering his patrons' tastes, as the palace was not the location mentioned in written accounts of Alexander's meeting with Darius's family.) The palace gives Veronese's version of the subject a more elegant and graceful mood than Le Brun's dark tent. The effect is theatrical and flamboyant by comparison with the more austere inner drama of Le Brun's.

[9] The picture plane is 'the extreme front edge of the imaginary space in the picture ... [it] is the plane at which the world of the spectator and of the picture make contact' (Murray, *Dictionary of Art and Artists*, p.342). Where the imaginary three-dimensional world of the painting starts for you (the viewer), what appears to recede is 'behind' the picture plane. What appears to come forward into your own space where you are standing is 'in front of' the picture plane.

The identity of the two male figures on the right of Veronese's painting is not entirely clear – either could be Alexander or Hephaestion. But Alexander is probably the figure in the pink tunic, arms outstretched, gesturing towards the figure in armour, his general, Hephaestion (whose breastplate carries a laurel leaf symbolic of victory). Sisygambis, centre foreground, seems to have switched her gaze towards Alexander while the other women still have slightly misdirected gazes. It has been suggested that Alexander's finery may be explained by his body odour problem, reported by Plutarch in his *Lives* (33:21): he had to wash and change after the heat of battle (Thomas, *Illustrated Dictionary of Narrative Painting*, p.111). Educated artists and clients would have been familiar with such sources and anecdotes.

Whatever the truth of Alexander's condition – stiff leg or body odour – the comparison between Le Brun's painting and Veronese's illustrates two important points in relation to our exploration of Le Brun and canonical works and values. First, we can see how he was working within a tradition of subjects and themes from classical antiquity and the Renaissance. Veronese and other artists who had treated the Darius subject were well known to Le Brun and his contemporaries, many of whom were familiar with the works in the king's collection and many of whom had visited Italy in order to study classical statuary and architecture, as well as Renaissance works, at first hand. Second, we can see how Le Brun interpreted canonical subjects within his own framework of stylistic priorities, so that colour and vibrant visual effects became less important than graceful but legible gestures, poses and expressions and carefully reasoned compositional effects. His contemporaries shared his distrust of colour, which was often viewed as a means of distracting the eye at the expense of exercising the intellect.

Colour versus design, Rubens versus Poussin

In 1672 Le Brun had to arbitrate in what has become known as the 'Quarrel of Colour and Design'. For some time, academicians had been split into two camps, the so-called Poussinists and the Rubenists. Supporters of Poussin (renowned for his careful drawing of the human figure and for his clear but powerful compositions – see Plate 80) argued that 'design' (which incorporated the general conception or composition of a work as well as drawing) was more important than colour in determining the total effect and status of a work of art. Followers of Rubens (famed for his rich colouristic effects – see Plate 64) argued the opposite. In practice, of course, the work of artists was rarely so one-sided in its characteristics as this quarrel implied. Le Brun settled the argument by means of a compromise which nevertheless revealed his own (Poussinist) priorities. While he admitted that design was more essential to art, because it was the main means of imitating and expressing what we know and experience (including our passions), he also conceded that colour could add perfection and beauty to a work. When painting a face, for example, flesh tones could add a beauty of their own as well as having a particular expressive value (in, for example, facial pallor or blushing). As we saw in the introduction to this book (pp.19–20), in seventeenth-century aesthetic theory it was common to assert that there was a universally accepted, objectively defined notion of beauty. Beauty was often defined in terms of the process of perfecting natural forms for which the ancients were renowned. But this process of perfection was most often

discussed in terms of the visual harmony resulting from the correct application of mathematical proportions in drawing. Because statuary was the main source of influence, colour was less readily associated with beauty.[10]

Plate 64 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Descent from the Cross*, 1611–14, oil on panel, 420 x 310 cm, Antwerp Cathedral. Photo: Scala.

[10] As we saw in the previous case study on the Parthenon marbles, the European preference for monochrome sculpture has arisen because the original colour was lost from antique sculpture.

The Quarrel of Colour and Design had been significant because colour was thought to delight the eye and the senses rather than the intellect. Le Brun's judgement was that although intellectual elements of form or design must be given higher status, colour must not be neglected. But the virulence of this particular quarrel, and the amount of pamphleteering and lobbying it generated, are testimony to the fact that his authority did not go unchallenged. Artists such as Pierre Mignard (1612–95), Le Brun's main rival, and theorists such as Roger de Piles (1635–1709) identified themselves as 'moderns' keen to challenge the artistic values of the 'ancients'. Their view that colour constituted the main achievement – rather than a minor embellishment – of art later bore fruit in eighteenth-century artistic practice.[11] This debate helps to illustrate the extent to which so-called canonical values are constantly contested and changing.

Le Brun's working method

We can gain a clearer idea of Le Brun's priorities by considering his own working methods, admirably described by Michel Gareau (*Charles Le Brun*, pp.67–81). The first thing Le Brun had to do was to choose a subject. Given that he normally worked for kings, bishops and ministers, he often had strong guidelines or instructions on this. Cardinals asked him for biblical subjects and Louis XIV, when he assumed sole charge of the kingdom in 1661 (after Mazarin's death), commissioned first battle scenes such as the Alexander series and then allegorical battle scenes with the king himself at their centre. Later in Louis's reign, as military glory was less in evidence and matters of religion were discussed (from 1683 onwards) on a daily basis at meetings of the king's council, biblical subjects regained popularity. Le Brun engaged in serious scholarly research into his subject, consulting the Bible or ancient poets such as Virgil and Homer; he studied the customs of past ages and the many visual symbols used over the centuries in connection with Christian and mythological subjects (as we saw in *The King Governs Alone*) in order to make his paintings as authentic and explicit in meaning as possible. Intellectual understanding and scholarship lay at the basis of his working method.

Having chosen a subject, Le Brun next had to consider its final destination or location: this would influence the size, shape and colour of the finished work. Most of his works were large, in keeping with the grand apartments of the patrons for whom they were destined. Like all art, his was influenced by its intended function: Louis's commissions were usually for grand historical or moral subjects to be displayed in public, rather than private, spaces.

Le Brun would then sketch out on paper, in black chalk, an idea for a composition: this was a traditional method for artists of his generation. He obeyed strict laws of anatomy, proportion and geometry both in the individual elements of his compositions (human figures, for example) and in their overall distribution. Artists of this period used copy-books which encouraged them to study and imitate the anatomical details and mathematical proportions of

[11] Case Study 9 in Barker *et al.*, *The Changing Status of the Artist* (Book 2 in this series), identifies Watteau's art as similarly dedicated to the expressive and decorative qualities of colour.

classical statuary, as well as Renaissance figure studies, since these were felt to provide the true measure of beauty. Le Brun made extensive use of diagonal lines and pyramidal shapes and groupings in his compositions. It's interesting to note that in a preparatory sketch for *The Passage of the Granicus* (Plate 65), one of a series of four massive paintings currently at the Louvre known as the Alexander cycle (Plates 66–69), the soldiers, weapons and horses are arranged beneath a diagonal line stretching from the top right-hand corner of the canvas to the middle of the left-hand side. In the finished work, however, the figures are grouped in a pyramidal formation with an apex above and slightly to the right of Alexander's head (Plate 66).[12] It is worth pausing to consider the effects of these compositional devices. Traditionally, the use of diagonal lines is thought to add a sense of drama and movement, whereas triangular and pyramidal shapes and groupings are considered to generate a sense of stability. Do you think these plates bear this out – or are matters more complicated?

Plate 65 Charles Le Brun, *The Passage of the Granicus*, compositional sketch, pen and black ink with grey wash over red and black chalk, 29 x 47 cm, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

[12] In *The Passage of the Granicus* we see Alexander, with white-plumed helmet, about to cross the river Granicus in order to attack the troops of Memnon, one of Darius's generals. According to historical accounts, Alexander wanted to avenge previous Syrian attacks on Greece. One of his cavalrymen saves him from attack by a Persian with a sword in both hands.

Plate
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Plate 66 Charles Le Brun, *The Passage of the Granicus*, 1661–5, oil on canvas, 470 x 1209 cm, Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

Plate 67 Charles Le Brun, *The Triumph of Alexander* (also known as *Alexander's Entry into Babylon*), 1661–5, oil on canvas, 450 x 707 cm, Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

Plate 68 Charles Le Brun, *Alexander and Porus*, before 1673, oil on canvas, 470 x 1264 cm, Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

Plate 69 Charles Le Brun, *The Battle of Arbella*, before 1673, oil on canvas, 470 x 1265 cm, Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

Le Brun experimented with different ways of representing his hero's prowess and, indirectly, that of his own monarch. In *The Battle of Arbella* (Plate 69) a large pyramidal grouping reaches an apex at the eagle above Alexander's head, but there are other pyramidal groupings within the painting, such as the one culminating in the golden chariot of Darius. This painting shows Alexander on his horse, sword in hand, engaged in a battle which took place at the foot of the Gordian mountains on the plain of Arbella with an army of 40,000 men. Darius, his enemy, could only effectively use a proportion of his army of a million; there were too many men on the battlefield and the ensuing chaos, reflected in the chaotic mass of figures and action in Le Brun's painting, was Darius's downfall. Next to Alexander we see a man with white hair, a soothsayer pointing to the eagle above Alexander's head, a symbol of Jupiter and victory. Notice how Le Brun always tries to add a patch of bright sky in a corner of his composition in order to relieve the darkness and to allow the viewer's eye some respite from a scene of tumultuous action. All of his

compositions were carefully planned: he even worked out his own geometric systems for lighting and for the arrangement of the planes (layers of depth) on which he placed his action and figures. His emotive art was devised in a highly rational way.

Once he had worked out an overall plan he accentuated details of figures and objects with the use of grey, white or brown highlights in pencil, with white chalk or, like his predecessor Poussin, by making a sketch in black ink (see Plate 70). He then used his drawing skills to add what he saw as the most expressive or poetic elements: facial expressions, hands and feet. All of these elements could express the feelings and thoughts of his figures. Finally, he gave his figures clothes and armour. At every stage of his figure sketching he respected the laws of anatomy and proportion in which the sculptors of antiquity had given such a strong lead. His own visit to Rome and his studies in France had trained him, like all academic artists of the day, in the art of improving on nature by referring to plaster casts, originals and engravings of antique statues (see Plates 13 and 78).

Plate 70 Charles Le Brun, highlighted drawing of *The Battle of Arbella*, pen and ink with grey wash over red and black chalk, 27 x 43 cm, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

At last Le Brun was in a position to take up his brushes and paint, using as a guide the multitude of sketches he'd worked on (see Plate 71). He sometimes left backgrounds and scenery to assistants, but would always put the final, unifying touches to a work himself. Artistic status was often bound up with such divisions of labour. It seems evident, from this account of Le Brun's method, that any originality of design or expression was constrained within a carefully reasoned and researched framework. The same applied to Le Brun's approach to facial expression.

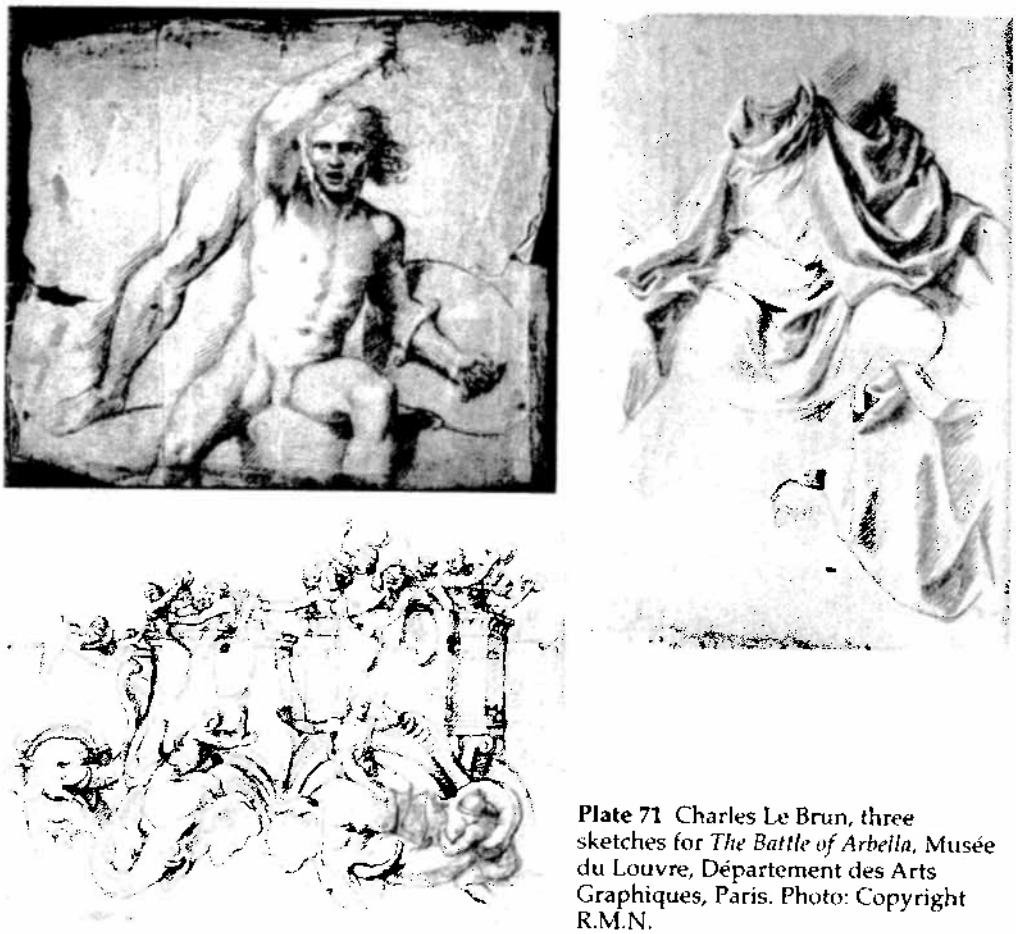

Plate 71 Charles Le Brun, three sketches for *The Battle of Arbella*, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

Establishing a canonical approach to expression

Le Brun's *Conférence sur l'expression* (Lecture on Expression) was published in 1698, 1702, 1718 and again in 1728.[13] Many other writers reported or modified his views on expression well into the eighteenth century, and his work on this topic influenced generations of history (and genre) painters into the nineteenth. In this section we'll be looking in detail at part of Le Brun's *Conférence* as a way of understanding the principles involved in his quest for a highly legible, rational and idealized artistic practice.

Before we do so, we should perhaps consider why Le Brun felt expression to be such an important topic and, indeed, what he meant by the term 'expression'. In the *Conférence* he defined it as 'a simple and natural image of the thing we wish to represent ... this which indicates the true character of each object' (quoted in Montagu, *Expression of the Passions*, p.126). For Le Brun, expression in art is a visual representation which captures the essence or inherent quality of something known or experienced by the artist. It is the

[13] An extract is included in Edwards, *Art and its Histories: A Reader*.

only means of ensuring the 'perfection' of a work of art, although, like many of his contemporaries, he tends to talk about perfection by means of circular definitions: good expression, drawing and composition make for perfection, and perfection results from good expression, composition and drawing. The general idea was that perfection was achieved by emulating the high standards set by the classical tradition – and that it *was* possible, on the basis of this tradition, to speak of an objective standard of beauty and perfection towards which all artists should strive.

In this particular lecture, Le Brun placed an emphasis on the expression of the passions or the emotions, particularly through the movement of facial features. He felt the topic of expression was important, however, because it applied to *all* aspects of art, including colour, drawing and composition. These could be used to express the true character of things; all these instruments of expression (such as colour, drawing and composition) were necessary to an artist who wished to create an illusion of reality. Le Brun was anxious that he was developing a formula for a convincing *illusion* of reality rather than teaching means of capturing likenesses of photographic accuracy. What he and other classically inspired artists sought was a visual code or *equivalence* for things existing in the real world which would allow viewers to recognize the 'true character' (rather than the superficial peculiarities) of the sights, events and personalities he wished to depict. He wanted to provide sufficient visual clues to enable the spectator to engage imaginatively with the scenes he created. Although much had already been written on the topic, Le Brun felt his own lecture would help students and fellow academicians to understand the subject more clearly.

Le Brun saw the passions as movements of the sensitive or feeling part (as opposed to the reasoning or other parts) of our soul. They help us to pursue or avoid what is good or bad for us – they are a kind of early warning system, letting us know whether we should chase or flee. They also make parts of our body move by affecting our nerves, which send signals to our muscles. He believed that the passions make a strong impression on the brain, and particularly on a small gland, the pineal gland (see Plate 72), situated in the centre of the brain. (The Concise Oxford Dictionary informs us that the pineal gland is 'a pea-sized conical mass of tissue behind the third ventricle of the brain, secreting a hormone-like substance'.) The brain, thus affected, could then have an impact on other parts of the body, including facial features, via the nervous system. Le Brun's ideas were based on those expressed in *The Passions of the Soul* (1649) by René Descartes (1596–1650), an important philosopher who attempted to describe the physiological effects of the emotions as part of a wider enquiry into the way in which humankind's immaterial, spiritual soul interacted with the material, physical body. In our own age of advanced medical and psychological research, many of Descartes's ideas appear to be based largely on supposition. Many of his ideas on the composition of the soul and the workings of the body were in fact derived from ancient Greek and Roman thinkers and physicians such as Aristotle, Hippocrates and Galen. But we do need to appreciate their currency and authority at the time in which Le Brun was writing.

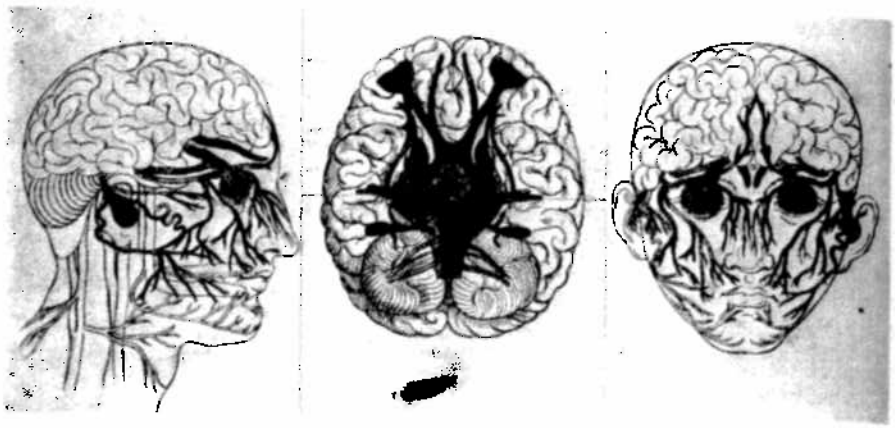

Plate 72 Charles Le Brun, drawing showing location of the pineal gland, pen and black ink over black chalk heightened with watercolour and red chalk, 14 x 39 cm, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

Le Brun asserted (with a touching confidence) that the eyebrow is the most expressive part of the face because it best shows the 'nature of the agitation' of the soul. Plate 72 shows how the eyebrows are linked to the pineal gland situated 'in the middle of the brain' – the brain being the part of the body 'where the soul exercises its functions most immediately'. Although Le Brun conceded that eyes, mouths and noses can betray or express emotion (he also mentioned clenched fists ready to strike or legs ready to flee as emotional signals), he felt that the eyebrow was capable of the greatest and most subtle range of positions, and thus able to express passions of all kinds. Plates 73 and 74 show some of the different degrees and directions of curvature of which, according to Le Brun, the eyebrow is capable.

Plate 73 Charles Le Brun, drawing showing astonishment with terror, black ink over chalk, c.14 x 11 cm, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

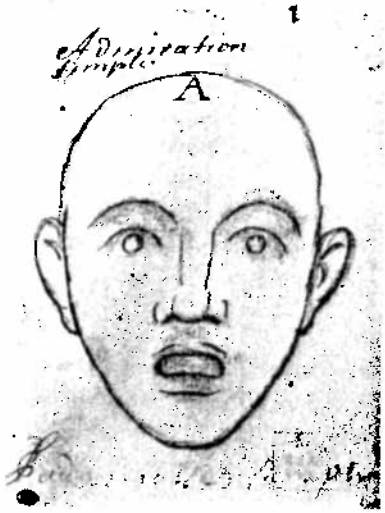

Plate 74 Charles Le Brun, drawing showing simple admiration, black ink over chalk, c.14 x 11 cm, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

Le Brun's illustrations of eyebrow movements appear as exaggerated natural facial contortions. Generations of artists and critics after Le oked for more naturalistic ways of expressing the feelings of human But it could be argued that Le Brun was taking natural expressions, out and exaggerating their main characteristics in the interests of legibility and impact. Cartoonists work in a similar way.

number of Le Brun's facial types, both theoretical and practical, drew er sources – particularly ancient statuary, Leonardo da Vinci, angelo, Raphael, Veronese, Domenichino and Poussin (see Plates 24, 76).[1] But his insistence on returning, in his *Lecture on Expression*, to nciples (specifically, the physiological principles established by tes) again demonstrates a tendency to allow study of the art of the test and develop, rather than dictate, his artistic values. We might say expressive prototypes were driven more forcefully by experimentation udience response: he wanted spectators to recognize and respond to ssions he represented.

Plate 75 Charles Le Brun, *The Brazen Serpent*, c.1647, oil on canvas, 95 x 133 cm, Bristol, City Art Gallery. By permission of the City of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. (According to the Bible, the Children of el were punished by a plague of poisonous snakes after complaining to Moses about their arduous ney out of Egypt. Many of the Israelites died from snake bites, whilst others turned to Moses ging for help. Moses was advised by God to make a fiery serpent and set it up on a pole. God mised Moses that all those who had died would come alive again if they looked at this brazen age.)

[1] According to Montagu (*Expression of the Passions*, p. 35) the *Laocoön* (Plate 24) provided the el for the face of the man holding the dead girl in *The Brazen Serpent* background, right centre (Plate 75). There is not space here to enter into precise comparisons between Le and the artistic precedents on which he drew, but Montagu does this very well *ression of the Passions*, chapters 3 and 5).

Plate 76 Charles Le Brun after Raphael, *Head of a Follower of Heliodorus*, ink and wash on paper, Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N. (According to Montagu, this provided the model for the head of the fallen man at the right in *The Brazen Serpent*.)

Le Brun's guidelines on facial expression allowed artists and educated spectators to share a common language of expression. His approach was systematic and schematic in the visual shorthand it proposed, but it was also complex. For example, he linked precise movements of the eyebrow with specific configurations of other facial features. He indulged openly in generalization, confidently stating, for example, that 'when the heart is dejected all the parts of the face will be cast down' (quoted in Montagu, *Expression of the Passions*, p.131). Exaggeration and over-simplification were perhaps an inevitable consequence of the desire to be clear and rigorous.

We must remember that Le Brun wanted his prototypes to be as clear and explicit as possible so that students could learn from them. As they were intended largely for history painting, with its scenes of high passion and drama – battles, plagues, miracles and so on – extremes of expression were appropriate. The prototypes were intended to be modified for less dramatic subjects. In the genre of portraiture, where different conventions and expectations applied, Le Brun's approach to facial expression was more naturalistic (Plate 77).

Plate 77 Charles Le Brun, *Self-Portrait*, 1684, oil on canvas, 80 x 63 cm, Uffizi, Florence. Photo: Scala.

Summary of the canonical values guiding Le Brun's artistic practice and teaching

What, then, were the canonical values guiding Le Brun's artistic practice and teaching? First, rational planning lay at the basis of all aspects of his art, especially when it came to the methods to be used for expressing the least rational or passionate aspects of human behaviour; there was a 'code' and theoretical framework for everything. Drawing and composition were further elements of this rational or intellectualized approach to art.

Second, the demands of legibility (clear, explicit meanings) were much more important than those of artistic individuality, originality or 'sincerity'. The elements of Le Brun's paintings might be regarded as parts of a visual signalling system whose relationships to one another and to the viewer's knowledge of such a system were more significant than any connection with the authentic feelings of the artist.

Third, ancient Greece and Rome were, along with the Bible, the chief sources for his subjects. His study of 'antique' precedent, such as the copies of the statues frequently studied by students at the Académie royale, carried with it assumptions about the 'best' or canonical models and standards to be followed. Following the ancients meant trying, as they had, to improve on nature. Le Brun's prototypes for facial expression are not based on particular expressions observed at particular moments in specific, individual faces. They represent what were felt to be the most eloquent and significant configurations of features, based on what had been worked out to be the essential character and physiological impact of the passions in question. Contemporary aesthetic debate distinguished between the 'real' (a faithful representation of the external appearance of things, warts, peculiarities and all) and the 'ideal' (the essential characteristics of things, belonging to a hidden, transcendent but more significant reality). Contemporary commentators referred to the latter as 'beautiful' or 'ideal' nature: the hidden order and shape of things, more perfect than what we observe in everyday life because it was the distilled essence of such observations. This view was based on the ideas of the Athenian philosopher Plato (*c.*429–347 BCE), who had conceived of a world of ideal forms, essences or prototypes, of which individual objects in this world are only imperfect copies. An individual tree, for example, is only an imperfect copy of a purer idea or prototype tree which is nevertheless recoverable from the world of variable and fluctuating appearances we inhabit.

A similar rational search for essential and prototypical qualities characterized Le Brun's depiction of the human body: like the ancients and the Renaissance masters who had transmitted their ideas, Le Brun wanted to improve on nature by representing the body not only in accordance with anatomical study but also having regard for some idea of perfect proportion. This idea stemmed from the works of classical mathematicians and philosophers (such as Pythagoras and Plato) who had made connections between geometry, harmony and beauty. The beautiful form would be identified by the proportions between its parts (for example, the length of a head in relation to a body). To those initiated into the wonders of ancient sculpture, these proportions satisfied an expectation of a harmonious, rather than jarring, effect on the eye. They also expressed perfectly the physical or psychological attributes with which the artist was concerned. On the basis of such

Plate 78 *The Gladiator*, marble, life-size, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: Alinari.

connections between geometry, harmony and beauty, Greek and Roman sculptors devised the 'perfect' proportions for beauty (for example, in the figure of Antinous – see Plate 13), athleticism (in the Gladiator – see Plate 78) and so on; the human form must express perfectly its qualities and function.

Fourth, Le Brun worked within the strict hierarchy of genres outlined earlier (p.93). He dealt with the highest kinds of subjects, his portraits generally being of the more eminent members of society. Le Brun's extreme facial prototypes suited the 'larger than life' subjects and methods of the history genre. An emphasis on this genre was in line with the Académie royale's aim of raising painting to the status of a liberal art such as epic poetry: artists were to be painter-poets, more concerned with the mind and soul than with the body. They were to show human beings engaged in dramatic or morally significant actions. Invention (the artist's imaginative conception of a subject) was seen as superior to execution (his technical skills).

Le Brun was able to reinforce the canonical status of these values by his position as teacher and Director of the Académie. Indeed, his influence spread beyond it as, in 1663, he was put in charge of the Gobelins factory, the centre of production of royal furniture, tapestries and mosaics. The Gobelins employed members of craft guilds: gilders, metal casters, tapestry-makers, gold and silversmiths, as well as painters and sculptors. Le Brun was just as adept at designing a candelabra, a basin or a door lock (as he did at Versailles) as he was at designing a painting. Many of his paintings were transformed into tapestry designs (compare Plates 75 and 79). It was common for artists of high standing to be commissioned to execute tapestry designs (which might involve grisaille[15] sketches and full-size cartoons) or for their paintings to be 'converted' into tapestries. This was, in a sense, a fusion of their old (craft) status and new (liberal) status, but tapestries were usually commissioned for grand, prestigious settings. Like paintings, tapestries were often conceived

[15] Painting in grey or greyish monochrome (that is, a single colour).

Plate 79 After Le Brun, *The Brazen Serpent*, tapestry, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

in this period as part of a decorative whole, as overdoor and panel decoration; they were chosen with a particular context of paint, furniture and ornament in mind. In the present-day Louvre, Le Brun's tapestry cartoons are exhibited as prominently as his painted works, perhaps attempting to restore the alliance of art and craft undermined in earlier times.

In 1666 Colbert founded the Académie de France in Rome, a kind of annexe to the Académie royale at which prizewinners of an annual competition were allowed to study for three or four years. Le Brun's involvement with these competitions, as well as his lectures, ensured that he could play a significant part in reinforcing certain artistic values and practices. But was he really a dictator of taste? Let's turn now to our third and final question.

Was Le Brun's canon really a form of artistic dictatorship?

In answering this question, we need to take into account the seventeenth-century context. Although the teaching sessions led (and often concluded) by Le Brun often resulted in the passing of resolutions intended to guide student painters, there is very little evidence that such resolutions caused violent disagreements or were likely to force painters into working in ways which they found unacceptable. If there was any 'dictatorship', it seems likely that it was that of the system as a whole (court-dominated sources of patronage) rather than an individual artist: the real tyranny was the social and political context in which artists worked. There is plenty of evidence from the records of Académie lectures and discussions kept by Félibien that healthy debate took place. These debates may have taken place within a restricted framework of the concerns of grand history painting, but they do demonstrate that respect for a canon of 'great masters', past and present, was moderated by a quest for scholarly and scientific accuracy.

One such debate arose concerning a painting by Poussin, his *Eliezer and Rebecca* (Plate 80). This work tells the biblical story of Abraham's servant Eliezer (centre foreground), who had been sent to find a wife for Abraham's son Isaac. Eliezer had been promised that a sign from God would help to identify the right wife for Isaac: the girl in question would reveal herself by offering water to Eliezer and the camels with which he was travelling (Genesis 24:22–7). In Poussin's painting Rebecca (centre-right foreground) has already identified herself in this way and is being presented with jewels and an offer of marriage. In 1668 Phillipe de Champaigne delivered a lecture (repeated in 1682) on this painting. He felt that Poussin should have included the camels, as he had done in an earlier version of the subject: the camels would have introduced a more down-to-earth note into this mass of idealized (in the sense of too perfect, unrealistic) beautiful women. Le Brun and Félibien, however, felt that Poussin had had good reason to deviate from the biblical text: camels would have been a bizarre, incongruous element in a painting of such grace and beauty. At stake, in Le Brun's view, was the principle of an artist's right to freedom in formulating a composition. Both sides of the debate had their own supporters, and discussion of the problem of Poussin's camels has continued to the present day, one commentator arguing that Poussin's decision to omit the camels may have been due to the fact that he saw the subject as a kind of Annunciation – a parallel to Mary's receiving the news from the Angel Gabriel that she would give birth to Christ.[16] This is but one example of the debates that took place; others were of a less historical, more scientific nature.

Plate 80 Nicolas Poussin, *Eliezer and Rebecca*, 1648, oil on canvas, 118 x 197 cm, Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

[16] See Glen, 'A note on Poussin's *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well* of 1648', pp.221–4.

It could be argued that some of these debates were so constrained in their terms of reference – a narrow canon of artists, the Bible – that they represented no significant threat or alternative to dominant artistic values. There is, however, another way of looking at this. If academies can institutionalize art and crystallize canonical principles, they are also the natural context in which canons can be questioned. The Académie's debates could be seen as attempts to subject canonical art and principles to rational, scholarly and scientific scrutiny, albeit within the boundaries and emphases of seventeenth-century knowledge. This is a trend which was to continue well into the eighteenth century, and in retrospect we can see how these small beginnings in scrutinizing an artistic canon led to much more dramatic developments and challenges to canonical academic values in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Académie royale of the seventeenth century did much to establish works of art as objects of study in their own right, as well as to provide a wider public with a vocabulary and way of analysing art which would later allow it to form independent judgements.

Plate 81 Titian, *Saint Mary Magdalen in Penitence*, c.1530–5, oil on panel, 84 x 69 cm, Pitti Gallery, Florence. Photo: Scala.

Le Brun's era was an age of rule making and of a quest for the universal – for truths which could apply at all times and in all places. For example, Nicolas Boileau set down rules for poets and writers in his *Art poetique* (1674). François duc de la Rochefoucauld laid down rules for social conduct in his *Réflexions ou sentences et maximes morales* (1664). Le Brun's rules on expression must be seen in this context. In modern times there is generally more scepticism about the validity of 'universal truths', and hence the modern tendency to question the notion of a canon of art.

Almost as soon as Le Brun's ideas on expression had received a wide currency, other theorists came along in order to challenge both the apparent rigidity of these ideas and Le Brun's emphasis on drawing at the expense of colour. Charles-Antoine Du Fresnoy, Henri Testelin and Roger de Piles led the way in demanding a less schematic, more 'natural' approach to expression. (De Piles also promoted the cause of the Rubenists or colourists – see above, p.103.) We should also remember that during Le Brun's 'reign' at the Académie, his fellow artists were free to praise in their lectures the merits of artists such as Veronese (Plate 62) and Titian (Plate 81), renowned for their rich colouristic effects and for the pleasure these effects gave the eye, as well as those renowned for their drawing skills. Le Brun himself was not above experimenting with the rich effects of colour prized by followers of Titian and Rubens, as we can see in his *Penitent Magdalen* (Plate 82) and *Descent from the Cross* (Plate 83 – compare with Plate 64), originally destined for a chapel for Carmelite nuns in Lyons.

Plate 82 Charles Le Brun, *The Penitent Magdalen*, oil on canvas, 252 x 171 cm, Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

Plate 83
125 cm.

te 53 Charles Le Brun, *The Descent from the Cross*, 1679, oil on canvas, 545 x
...n, Rennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts. Photo: Louis Deschamps.

It would seem, then, that a respect for a well-defined canon of artistic works and principles did not prevent Le Brun or his contemporaries from experimenting with a variety of approaches within carefully circumscribed limits. Le Brun's 'dictatorship', such as it was, did not entirely suppress the rights of the individual artist.

Conclusion

We have seen how the prevailing political and cultural conditions of seventeenth-century France encouraged the enshrinement and canonization of particular works of art and of the principles which they embodied. But this did not totally suppress changes and shifts in emphasis: academies were, after all, centres of learned debate. While artists such as Jean-Baptiste Jouvenet (1644–1717) (Plate 84) and Antoine Coypel (1661–1722) (Plate 85) carried forward many of Le Brun's traditions and priorities, others such as Charles de la Fosse (1636–1716) (Plate 86), who was commissioned to do some work for Versailles, developed more fully the colouristic and painterly[17] aspects of their art. The latter paid less attention to clearly defined, sculptural forms and more to the textural effects of paint which might delight the eye rather than the mind: the antithesis of a polished academic finish/paint surface, in which the individual brushstroke must be concealed. Under the patronage of Pierre Crozat, a wealthy collector, de la Fosse, a senior academician, helped to establish a taste for the pictorial values which would later contribute to the success of painters like Watteau in the eighteenth century. Canonical traditions popularized by Le Brun scrutinized and refined, rather than adopted or rejected without question, the traditions of the past. In eighteenth-century France the scrutiny of canonical values derived from the classical tradition was to intensify and gather pace. In other countries – as you will see in relation to Hogarth, discussed in the next case study – artists working outside the constraints of the large academies also helped to broaden the boundaries of art. This process of liberalization has continued to the present day, when the virtues of canonical art are no longer taken for granted and the institutionalization of art in any form is the object of (at least) critical scrutiny and (at most) a deep-seated aversion proclaimed in the name of independent creativity.

[17] A *painterly* approach is one which exploits the texture and physical properties of paint and which uses indeterminate patches of colour rather than clearly outlined forms.

Plate 8
Louvre

Plate 8
Louvre