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Introduction

The Critics and Their Ingres (1834–1855)

"It was with *Saint Symphorien* that Monsieur Ingres waged his last battle." So declared Amaury-Duval in his influential memoir, *L'Atelier d'Ingres*,[1] thereby acknowledging the fact that his notoriously sensitive and impetuous former master, incensed by the hostile reception of his principal submission to the 1834 Salon (Fig. 3), announced his retirement from public life just weeks after the opening of the exhibition. Specifically, the artist forswore all governmental commissions and declared that he would never again participate in the Salon. Even though Ingres would eventually be seduced back into accepting lucrative and prestigious public commissions, he kept his word vis-à-vis the Salon; with the exception of his massive retrospective at the 1855 Universal Exposition, a painting by his hand never again appeared in an official exhibition.

Ingres's renunciation of what was undoubtedly the single most important artistic institution of his day would seemingly justify not only Amaury-Duval's characterization of the 1834 Salon as Ingres's "*dernière bataille*" but also the tendency among subsequent historians to dismiss the last three decades of the artist's career as an extended period of semiretirement. Ensconced in his academic *fauteuil*, Monsieur Ingres, the standard account goes, became the personification of artistic reaction. No longer a driving force within the contemporary art world, he functioned as a kind of deadweight, impeding the march of progress by continuing to champion woefully outdated, classicist ideals. Thus, particularly within the last half century or so, scholars have tended to focus on the earlier decades of Ingres's career, the period during which the future academician was himself something of an *enfant terrible*, scandalizing the artistic powers-that-be with such thoroughly unconventional productions as *Napoleon I on his Imperial Throne* (see Fig. 52) and the infamously elongated *Grande Odalisque* (Fig. 35). The middle decades of the nineteenth century have been given over to the succeeding generations of young Turks – Delacroix, Courbet, Manet, and the Impressionists – with Ingres's historical role being reduced to that of defining "other": the embodiment of academic decrepitude and official intolerance against which these artistic revolutionaries constituted themselves.

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This study seeks to upset this familiar art historical scenario, demonstrating how Ingres continued to be an important player in the Parisian art world well into the middle of the century, and arguing as well that his relevance extended far beyond his customary role as foil to the burgeoning avant-garde. My case is founded on a systematic examination of the artist's critical reception during the twenty-year period following his momentous renunciation of the Salon in 1834, a period during which, subsequent prejudices not withstanding, Ingres was probably the most talked-about – and certainly the most written-about – artist in France.

Of course, the study of critical "fortune" has long formed part of the standard repertoire of art historical writing. Ingres himself has been the object of several such studies, although, true to the general bias of scholarship on the artist, they have all focused on his early career.[2] Despite this long tradition, what one might call a theoretically informed or at least methodologically self-conscious approach to critical reception in art history remains very much in its infancy. Few of those who have set out to reconstruct the critical reactions to particular artists have paused to consider the fundamental value of such an undertaking. Exactly what kind of knowledge is produced by dredging up the comments of long-forgotten critics, and how does this knowledge contribute to the art historical enterprise? Why, in short, should we be interested in what these old and perhaps ill-informed commentators had to say?

The most fundamental answer I have to offer to these questions is that the critical reaction elicited by Ingres (or any other artist for that matter) constitutes more than reaction per se; it is an integral component of the overall signifying process. Thus, instead of critical reaction or reception, a better term to describe what I have set out to study in this work might be discursive construction – the means by which Ingres and his works were constituted through the generation, circulation, and transformation of critical discourse.[3] Such an undertaking rests in part on the fundamental supposition that meaning is not something that is inscribed permanently into works of art at the moment of their material completion but arises only after they have been unleashed onto the world. The principal site of interpretation therefore lies not in the relationship between the art-object and the individual who "created" it but rather in the exchanges that occur between the art-object and its potentially endless parade of viewers.

These precepts are not, of course, my own; like so much else in contemporary art history, they derive from the realm of literary criticism, more specifically from debates that erupted in Germany in the late 1960s over issues of reception and the contemporaneous declaration in France that the Author was dead. Although a scholar breaching the frontier of his or her own discipline inevitably runs the risk of oversimplification (not to mention vulgarization), I feel compelled to explicate my own understanding of the basic tenets underlying these complex literary developments as a means of laying the theoretical groundwork for the study that follows. My analysis is by no means an exhaustive account of reception theory or the "death of the author" debate but a highly selective, necessarily

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schematic exploration of those ideas that most directly informed the generation of this particular study.

In an early and influential review article, Henry J. Schmidt divided burgeoning reception studies into two distinct categories: *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (reception history) and *Rezeptionsästhetik* (reception aesthetics).[4] Although both disciplines are concerned with meaning as the product of the interaction between text and reader, they differ on the crucial issue of how the latter is to be conceptualized. According to exponents of *Rezeptionsästhetik*,[5] the reader is an ideal construct – something that does not exist in historical time and space but is rather a function or, more specifically, a projection of the text. The reader is conceived, in other words, not as a preexisting, independent agent but as something that is called into being by the text. The historian's task is to recover the position of this ideal or "implied" reader, in whose response the "correct" or at least the most appropriate meaning of the text will be located. Thus, in the end, *Rezeptionsästhetik* is essentially object-oriented; its focus remains riveted on the cues and directives within the text that produce an appropriate partner for the signifying process.

Unlike *Rezeptionsästhetik*, *Rezeptionsgeschichte* is concerned with the reactions of "real" historical readers – actual men and women who, for whatever reason, have become engaged with particular texts. Here meaning is considered to be determined not so much by the attributes of the texts themselves as by the characteristics of the readers who confront them. Reception history is therefore resolutely – I am tempted to say radically – subject-oriented; it assumes as its point of departure not the text but the subjectivities of those who read it. This is not to say that reception history locks the text out of the signifying process altogether. Obviously, all texts seek to prompt and direct their readers through the mobilization of a set of more-or-less standardized linguistic (or visual) codes and conventions, the collective comprehension of which is the very condition of communication. These codes and conventions are by their very nature polysemic or partially "indeterminate," however, making the kinds of significances they generate dependent on a whole array of extra-textual circumstances.[6] The historian of reception is interested in the extenuating circumstances that arise from the subjectivities of actual readers, whose positions can be categorized according to a wide variety of criteria depending on the particular interests of the investigator: class, race, gender, political affiliation, nationality, sexual orientation, and so on. Thus in the end, the aim of reception history is not to assign new, previously undiscovered meanings to a text but rather to identify and explain those that have already been attached to it.[7]

This basic split between *Rezeptionsästhetik* and *Rezeptionsgeschichte* in literary criticism informs the still rather meager sampling of theoretically informed audience-oriented studies in art history.[8] The most important proponent of *Rezeptionsästhetik* in the study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European art is the German scholar Wolfgang Kemp.[9] A number of other historians have concerned themselves with viewer-response, although they have operated less programmatically under the rubric of *Rezeptionsästhetik*. Undoubtedly the most

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important of these is Michael Fried.[10] Both Fried and Kemp, along with their various followers and protégés,[11] tend to be concerned not with the responses of actual, historical viewers but with the ideal viewing positions they perceive to be demanded by the internal structure of the works of art themselves. These scholars are not, in other words, primarily interested in the particular circumstances under which certain objects have been viewed, nor with the social or psychological makeup of their audiences, but with the internal logic of the works and the effects of this arrangement on ostensibly any viewer who comes into contact with them – "Der Betrachter ist im Bild" ("The beholder is in the picture"), as the title of one of Kemp's publications emphatically proclaims.

The charge to which art historical as well as literary applications of *Rezeptionsästhetik* is most vulnerable is that of ahistoricism. Reception aesthetics assumes a viewer who is both willing and able to obey the promptings and directives of the text and thereby realize its uniquely authentic or "true" meaning. No attempt is made to document such a realization – to demonstrate that a particular reading has ever, in fact, occurred; all that matters is that this interpretation could – or, perhaps more precisely, should – emerge whenever the work in question is confronted by a "properly" positioned reader. The second major criticism that can be leveled against *Rezeptionsästhetik* is that it ultimately (and somewhat paradoxically) reinforces the dictatorial authority of the text.[12] The reader is denied all vestiges of independence or autonomy as he or she – and gender is obviously crucial here[13] – is forced to assume the perspective demanded by the text. In order to properly understand and appreciate the art object, the viewer must submit to its authority; otherwise, "illegitimate" or deviant readings will occur.

Any study devoted to art criticism, that is, the recorded responses of actual men and women who encountered a particular work of art and resolved to comment on it publicly, would almost of necessity fall under the rubric of *Rezeptionsgeschichte* as opposed to *Rezeptionsästhetik*. And indeed, the majority of art historical studies of critical reception – the ubiquitous "so-and-so and their critics" genre of writing – would most logically be grouped under this category. The scholar who has done the most to transform this conventional approach into a theorized form of *Rezeptionsgeschichte* is the Marxist historian Nicos Hadjinicolaou.[14] "A work of art exists as such from the moment that it has been looked at, that is consumed, used and thus transformed," Hadjinicolaou declared in a seminal early essay on the problematics of reception – "It does not have a nature prior to the first glance that is thrown upon it after it has left the studio of the artist and has entered into public life."[15] This constitutive glance is determined for Hadjinicolaou not so much by the internal characteristics of the art object as by the social, economic, and political circumstances under which it is viewed.[16] It is the historian's task to reconstruct these circumstances by analyzing the positions of the viewers who have responded to it – a task in which criticism, as one of the relatively few directly retrievable forms of historical audience-response, could obviously prove crucial.

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Although Hadjinicolaou is perhaps the most prominent art historian to situate himself systemically within the tradition of *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, he is certainly not the only one to appeal to art criticism as a means of recuperating the ideological content of works of art. To remain within the realm of the history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European art, T. J. Clark's early work on Courbet and Manet as well as that of his student Thomas Crow on David stand as particularly important examples of this method.[17] It is in the tradition of these studies that I would like to position the present work.

Just as there are obvious problems from a strictly historical perspective with *Rezeptionsästhetik*, there are certain theoretical difficulties involved in the practical application of *Rezeptionsgeschichte*. Most significantly, this approach stands open to charges of naive historicism and/or positivism on the one hand, and excessive relativism on the other. To claim with Hadjinicolaou and other exponents of *Rezeptionsgeschichte* that a work of art is reconstituted every time it is gazed upon by a different viewer verges on a kind of semantic nihilism; it seems tantamount to proclaiming that the work has no inherent meaning at all. To put this in more practical terms, a historian who begins with the perspective of the reader as opposed to the particularities of the text, as I have patently set out to do here (and thus the admittedly gimmicky inversion of the conventional order of the words in the title of this introduction), runs the risk of validating every interpretation imaginable. Yet validation is not really what is at stake here since the historian of reception appeals to viewer response not as a guarantor of truth or correctness but as an index of a particular work's ability to generate meaning under specific historical circumstances. Thus, had some uninformed *feuilletoniste* (mis)taken the subject of *Saint Symphorien* for an episode in the passion of Christ, I would not have been forced automatically to accept this interpretation as a valid assessment of the painting's iconography, but rather as evidence of the ambiguity of its pictorial language and/or its failure to signify before a specific audience. Misapprehension continues to be acknowledged as such, although its historical value may not necessarily be subordinated to that of more conventional or technically "correct" readings.

As for the more serious charge of positivism, *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, at least as exemplified here, is perhaps more difficult to defend, especially in the face of those who view history itself as a hopelessly naïve and ultimately impossible undertaking. According to this position, a historian's inability to transcend the prejudices and constraints of his or her own subjectivity mitigates any claims he or she might make about the past. Thus every historical statement ultimately tells us more about the interpreter than the ostensible object of his or her analysis. Although I would obviously agree that complete historical objectivity is a pipe dream and that a particular moment in time can never be recaptured in all its complexity and plenitude, I do not see these qualifications as sufficient reason to abandon the historical enterprise altogether. I may not know all the factors that conditioned what the critic Jules Janin wrote about Ingres's *Vierge à l'Hostie* (Fig. 23) or completely understand the myriad implications of his text

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for everyone who read it, but I can access what he wrote. Moreover, I refuse to believe that my imperfect understanding of this document or even my own personal prejudices with regard to its content necessarily and completely nullify my ability to mobilize it historically. The key is to recognize the innate limitations of this enterprise – to acknowledge that one is dealing in incomplete, personally inflected, hypothetical scenarios as opposed to historical absolutes.

One limitation of *Rezeptionsgeschichte* that has often been pointed out with regard specifically to the study of critical reaction is its tendency to reduce the myriad responses inevitably generated by any particular artist or work of art down to the highly conventionalized reaction of a narrowly circumscribed and relatively homogeneous professional elite. And indeed, this is undoubtedly the case. Only a minute percentage of the hundreds of thousands of people who periodically looked at or thought about Ingres's canvases has made it into the historical archive of recorded opinion. For every Baudelaire or Gautier who pronounced on the artist's achievement, there are thousands of nameless and faceless men, women, and children whose reactions are lost to us forever. Yet this hardly seems grounds for ignoring the responses that have survived, regardless of how rote or hackneyed or limited they may appear to be.[18] One however imperfect means by which I have endeavored to overcome the fragmentary and falsely homogenized state of the archive is by focusing on the diversity as opposed to consistency of opinion offered therein. Armed with the recently compiled bibliographies of Salon criticism as my guide,[19] I have endeavored to cast the widest possible net over midcentury art journalism, collecting the reactions of anonymous hacks writing for the obscurest and most fleeting trade journals as well as those of critical luminaries holding forth from prominent political dailies and intellectual reviews. Although I obviously cannot thereby pretend to have filled in all of the "gaps" and "silences" of the historical record, I can, I believe, claim to offer a wide and credibly representative sample of what has survived.[20]

Of course, the most important justification for privileging the responses of professional art critics, at least within a specifically nineteenth-century French context, is that theirs were quite simply the reactions that mattered most. Already in the decades leading up to the French Revolution, the Salon had emerged as the preeminent arena of artistic engagement in France – the space in which artistic reputations were made and lost.[21] As the centrality of the Salon continued to solidify and expand over the course of the nineteenth century, so too did the power and influence of the critics, particularly after the dramatic expansion and more-or-less definitive unfettering of the press with the establishment of constitutional rule in 1814–15. By 1834, the year in which this study begins, dozens of critics regularly assessed the works on display at the official exhibition. Clearly, all artists who sent their pictures to the Louvre did so with expectations of this impending critical onslaught and would have had a vested interest in trying to elicit a positive response. Indeed, as Ingres's own retreat from the critical free-for-all of the Salon and subsequent elaboration of various "public-relations" schemes to protect and enhance his reputation make clear, the securing of critical approbation became

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an integral part of the art-making process itself. Thus, the consideration of the critical writing on Ingres or of any other ambitious nineteenth-century French artist constitutes more than an arbitrary polling of opinion; it foregrounds the assessments of those who, according to the protocols of professional art making then in place, carried the most weight with artists and public alike.

Those who seek to understand the critical reception of any single nineteenth-century French artist face one final, practical (as opposed to theoretical) difficulty, namely, the deplorably primitive state of the research on the institution of art criticism during this period. Despite some recent and very admirable efforts,[22] French art journalism remains very much uncharted territory, particularly during the July Monarchy and early Second Empire, which are the periods that concern us here. This state of affairs imposes certain limits on the present study. Most notably, the near total lack of comparative material in the form of reliable analyses of the critical reception of other major midcentury artists makes it virtually impossible to ascertain the degree to which the trends I note in the critical writing on Ingres are artist-specific.[23] Yet the goal of this study has never been to demonstrate the uniqueness of Ingres's critical reception, but rather to use this body of writing to implicate the artist in important midcentury discourses to which he is normally thought to have been estranged.

This introduction has focused so far on the interpretive possibilities arising from the relationship between readers and texts (or spectators and art-objects); the third major participant or agent in any literary or artistic exchange – the author or artist – has been excluded from consideration. And indeed, one of the most fundamental tenets of reception studies, whether *Rezeptionsgeschichte* or *Rezeptionsästhetik*, is their evacuation of the author from the analytical process – their wholesale acceptance, in short, of the "death of the author." Of course this fateful phrase derives not from any theorist of reception per se but from the title of Roland Barthes's celebrated polemic of 1968.[24] This short, manifesto-like essay opens with the provocative declaration that "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing."[25] Barthes then goes on to deconstruct the modernist myth of the omnipotent, godlike author and posit in its wake the absolute autonomy of the text, which, he argues, is "not a line of words releasing a single theological meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash."[26] The moment in which these myriad writings are collated and processed is not, as is usually thought, the moment of production but rather that of reception. "The reader is the space in which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost," Barthes asserts; "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination."[27]

Barthes's essay might be regarded as providing the foundations for a theory of reception *avant la lettre*. More specifically, it anticipates the development of *Rezeptionsästhetik* as opposed to *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, for the reader Barthes

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posits as the "point of conversion" of the de-authored text is clearly an ideal, textually generated construct as opposed to a historical, preexisting agent. "Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal," he explains, because "the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted."[28] Thus for Barthes, as for many exponents of *Rezeptionsästhetik*, the text is a radically autonomous entity, anticipating and projecting its readers instead of being confronted and challenged – perhaps even violated – by them.

The idealist implications of Barthes's "assassination" of the author were taken up by Michel Foucault in a celebrated retort originally delivered before the Collège de France in February 1969.[29] Foucault claims that the death of the author has led to the mystification of what has been left behind, namely, the Text. One transcendent abstraction has simply been replaced by another, as the qualities formerly invested in the personage of the "Author-God" have simply been transferred to a no-less imperious, omnipotent Text. Foucault's purpose in critiquing Barthes's position was not, however, to challenge the fundamental concept of the death of the author but to direct our attention to the void that has been left behind. According to Foucault this void is purely illusory – the death of the "Author-God" does not simply free the text from all authorial associations but rather creates a space for what Foucault calls the "author function." This is not the biologically and psychologically constituted writer who "creates" a particular writing but a purely discursive construct – an essentially fictive being to whom we, as readers, find it necessary to attribute certain writings. The author is thus configured as an effect rather than the cause of the text; it enables the circulation and consumption of certain discourses that are generally – and essentially – recognized to have been authored.

The bulk of Foucault's essay is given over to broad theoretical generalizations concerning the existence and varieties of author functions. He glosses over the more practical implications of his analyses for the cultural historian with the following disclaimer: "For the purpose of this paper, I will set aside a sociohistorical analysis of the author as an individual and the numerous questions that deserve attention in this context; how the author was individualized in a culture such as ours; the status we have given the author, for instance, when we began our research into authenticity and attribution; the systems of valorization in which he was included; or the moment when the stories of heroes gave way to an author's biography; the conditions that fostered the formulation of the fundamental critical category of 'the man and his work.'"[30] There could be no better description of what I have set out to accomplish in the pages that follow – albeit on a much more modest, localized scale than that implied by the sweeping proclamation of Foucault. Using Ingres's critical reception as my guide, I have attempted to elaborate the particular, historically situated "author function" that the painter sought to fulfill during the crucial middle decades of his career. Or, more precisely, I have set out to explore the circumstances under which the artist was compelled to negotiate the conflicting demands placed on him by a

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wide array of competing "author functions" – the myriad, discursively generated artistic ideals in circulation at midcentury. And here it warrants reiterating that, far from seeing Ingres as settling down into a state of academic complacency following his progressive and more-or-less definitive absorption into the artistic establishment during the period 1824 to 1834, I regard him as having remained engaged in a perpetual struggle over self-definition. Institutional entrenchment did little, in the end, to stabilize the artist's sense of self; if anything, it seems only to have exacerbated his insecurities by locking him into a professional profile that was rapidly losing its cultural validity. As a result, the most striking aspect of Ingres's later career is not its stability or placidity but its fluidity and flux – its singular lack of fixedness.

Of course, I am not the first to find Ingres and his art to be rife with contradictions. Such a claim, in fact, constitutes what has emerged as the very cornerstone of the painter's art historical legacy: his maddeningly unstable, ambiguous position within the hotly contested but still dominant modernist histories of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art. As has been abundantly documented, Ingres considered himself a perpetuator, not an innovator – one who saw as his principal obligation the maintenance of the great classical tradition that ran from Phidias through Raphael to Poussin and David. "What do these so-called artists mean who preach the discovery of the 'new'? Is there anything new?" the painter at one point wondered. "Everything has been accomplished; everything has been found. Our task is not to invent but to continue."[31] Of course, Ingres was by no means alone in holding such opinions; self-effacing subjugation to select "Old Master" precedent had long constituted a core component of academic orthodoxy. As this tradition came increasingly under attack, the artist's unwavering adherence to its most basic tenets of retrospection and idealization earned him tremendous official and institutional clout. By the time of his death in January 1867, *Monsieur Ingres, Membre de l'Institut, Sénateur, Grand Officier de la Légion d'honneur*, was the most decorated artist of his age.

Yet, as critics and historians have always been quick to point out, Ingres's career was fraught with spectacular setbacks and bitter disappointments – for example, the searing, critical hostility that consistently greeted his publicly exhibited works during the first two decades of his career and periodically thereafter; his not infrequent blowups with various administrative and academic officials – events to which the artist unfailingly responded with an irrational combination of self-pitying desperation and self-righteous indignation that seems more suitable to a raging Romantic outcast than an anointed *chef d'école*. "Yes, art really needs someone to reform it," Ingres famously declared in the aftermath of his thorough redressing by reviewers of the 1806 Salon, "and I should very much like to be that revolutionary."[32]

More important still, Ingres's pictures have been deemed to violate many of the most basic tenets of the classical doctrine he so fervently espoused. Most notably, of course, the artist, so sought-after for his portraits and female nudes, has been judged a failure in the category of art making that mattered most to

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him – monumental history painting. His stylistic mannerisms have been regarded as even more aberrant; the often startling anatomical distortions and spatial disjunctions that characterize so many of his canvases seem to create an unbridgeable gulf between his own highly idiosyncratic artistic "vision" and any notion of academically codified "correctness." All this has prompted a tradition of art historical equivocation over Ingres – one that implicitly condemns the master for his stated agenda of artistic conservatism and backwardness but nonetheless recognizes and rewards his sometimes radical deviations from that agenda as rendering him subject to recuperation by a modernist avant-garde. Over the course of the twentieth century, such recuperation has effectively taken place, with the result that Ingres is now generally regarded as a kind of modernist malgré lui – one who contributed unintentionally to the emergence of modern art by progressing even as he tried to regress, by innovating even as he tried to conserve.

It is the qualifications that have been placed on Ingres's modernity that this study seeks to explore and complicate. Even though my intentions are certainly not to portray the artist as any kind of self-conscious rebel – Romantic, Realist, Modernist, or otherwise – I do hope to establish a set of parameters through which the jarring incongruities of his work and public persona can be regarded as something other than totally fortuitous.

Although there have occasionally been attempts to consider Ingres's deviations from the conventions of academic classicism as the results of a more-or-less intentional quest for an original mode of artistic expression,[33] it has more generally been assumed that these deviations were largely unconscious on the part of the artist and universally condemned by his contemporaries.[34] Credit for legitimating and valorizing the formal idiosyncrasies of Ingres's art has been given to subsequent generations of critics and historians, those with eyes trained by the formal innovations of such titans of early twentieth-century modernism as Picasso and Matisse. The efforts of those who have sought to identify the root causes of Ingres's formal aberrations have been dominated by two modes of explanation – one we might call procedural, the other psychoanalytic. The former deems the thematic and formal peculiarities of Ingres's art the unconscious by-products of various aspects of his working method – for example, a fundamental lack of imagination that caused him to fixate on the material here-and-now, thereby stunting his development as a history painter; a curiously fragmentary, piecemeal approach to painting in which the artist zeroes in obsessively on isolated parts of his composition, with little forethought as to how all the elements would come together in the end.[35] According to the other and currently more fashionable psychoanalytic model of interpretation, these idiosyncrasies are to be understood as manifestations of equally uncontrollable psychological states and/or disturbances – for example, an "anxiety of influence" resulting from an overwhelming sense of belatedness vis-à-vis Raphael, David, or the painter's own artist-father; deep-seated feelings of attraction/revulsion with respect to women; the artist's movement through and mobilization of the inevitable litany of Freudian stages and

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