

Introduction

Bodies of Knowledge

Even in the tense summer of 1789, as the rest of Europe warily eyed France's lurching steps toward revolution, it was still something of a scandal for an artist's home to be set upon by an angry crowd. Then again, it wasn't every day that a member of Britain's prestigious Royal Academy of Art quit painting to open a healing clinic either. The French-born, London-based artist Philippe de Loutherbourg was well known for his landscape paintings. Having first gained celebrity as a set designer at the popular Drury Lane theater, the artist had also invented a luminous display known as the Eidophusikon, one of the city's most fashionable attractions. His notoriety as a painter and entertainer lent an air of sensationalism to his new clinic – but it was de Loutherbourg's chosen method of treatment that sparked genuine controversy. It was widely reported that the artist was practicing “animal magnetism” (or “mesmerism”), a notorious and controversial medical therapy. First introduced by the physician Franz Anton Mesmer in Vienna in the 1770s, animal magnetism was said to be an imperceptible, magnet-like fluid that circulates within the human body. Mesmer claimed that all illnesses result from disequilibria in its flow and proposed to cure them by restoring the fluid's normal distribution within the body. Unable to gain professional acceptance in Vienna, Mesmer moved to Paris where his magnetic therapies were embraced by many in France's *haute monde*. Yet despite its popularity among high-ranking members of the French court, official approval from the country's scientific institutions eluded him. The controversy reached a fever pitch in 1784, when King Louis XVI called for an inquiry led by the American polymath and statesman Benjamin Franklin. Franklin's royal commission denied the existence of animal magnetism and thus publicly repudiated Mesmer's claims.

One of the difficulties encountered by Franklin's commission – and one of the reasons that some, like de Loutherbourg, continued to practice mesmerism afterward – vexed numerous empirical inquiries: the problem

of how to conclusively determine the existence of something that lay beyond man's powers of perception. Given that Enlightenment conceptions of science prized knowledge grounded in direct observation, how could one contend with phenomena that could not be directly observed?¹ How could one debate assertions that some *did* perceive a phenomenon which others did *not*? These questions give us a clue as to why animal magnetism remained a subject of public fascination even after it had been discredited by Franklin, for it claimed to possess considerable power over the human body through means that could not be directly apprehended.

De Loutherbouurg's clinic was short-lived. Initially the response was so overwhelming that entry tickets were sold on the black market. Within weeks the tide had turned and a throng of people converged on the artist's Hammersmith home, inflicting significant damage on the property. The artist, devoid of other means, returned to his artworks. Critics, no doubt with an eye to gossip and controversy, seized many opportunities to draw connections between the two activities. When London newspapers reported that de Loutherbouurg had resumed painting they wrote that, "Loutherbouurg . . . is again turning his MAGNETISM where it ought to be, to the PENCIL."² In the mid-1790s a widely read paper like *The Public Advertiser* could still announce that, "Loutherbouurg ceases magnetising his patients, but in some new landscapes will soon magnetise the public by the charms of his colours."³ Tongue-in-cheek as such comments may be, they suggest something quite specific about how art, science, and early Romanticism can be thought together at this moment.⁴ They begin to illuminate how deeply intertwined cultural practices of art and science together contested the evidentiary authority of the human body at the turn of the nineteenth century.

That critics drew analogies between artistic production and a practice on the edges of science is hardly surprising in general terms. From the inclusion of anatomy and optics in artistic training to experiments with the materials of their craft, engagements with science have increasingly been understood to determine key aspects of the work of artists of the time. For example, the Royal Academy's esteemed president Sir Joshua Reynolds created volatile pigments that were regarded as a form of experimental chemistry by his contemporaries.⁵ In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many artists were reading about, discussing, observing, and in some cases practicing a range of scientific subjects – from anatomy, chemistry, and meteorology to pneumatics, electricity, botany, and geology; and while their most literate viewers often studied these subjects as a form of recreation, people outside of elite realms were

frequenting “spectacular” demonstrations, lectures, and exhibitions deriving from the same.⁶ Yet de Louthembourg’s example suggests something further and far more particular than this: note the “popular” nature of the clinic, its status as a practice that demanded continued engagement with some of the most prominent scientists even as they tried to disprove it, and the way that analogies between artistic and mesmeric power could so easily (perhaps casually, but perhaps not) be drawn. As an artist and mesmerist, de Louthembourg is the earliest – and certainly the most outlandish – example discussed in this book of a figure who engaged not just with the popular display and consumption of science but also with doubts about the evidence that our own bodies might provide about the world. Idiosyncratic as it may seem, his story opens onto some of the most pressing and pervasive intellectual debates of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe. Such debates concerned the vulnerabilities of the human body, the possibilities and limitations of empiricism, and the lack of a fixed consensus as to what is scientifically “true” and how that truth can be authenticated. The historian of science Simon Schaffer has aptly termed this phenomenon a “crisis of facts,” a major epistemological transformation at the turn of the nineteenth century that involved the decline of an empirical framework that privileged the human body as the ultimate source of evidentiary knowledge.⁷ This was a crisis, we will see, that was in no way limited to Europe’s scientific academies and lecture halls.

It is from this perspective that we can reexamine the work of de Louthembourg alongside that of Henry Fuseli, the Anglo-Swiss master of gothic sensationalism, and Anne-Louis Girodet, France’s preeminent post-revolutionary painter – artists who are rarely discussed together and who are often taken as outliers rather than exemplars of their given artistic contexts.⁸ I bring these artists together not to reveal their underlying commonalities but rather because each explicitly engaged with a cluster of scientific activities that had a significant presence in the broader cultural landscape of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe within which the evidentiary authority of the human body was called into question.⁹ This direct engagement makes their work especially fertile for analysis, though it does not mean they are the only artists whose work could have participated in the larger history under consideration. However, they do share several important points in common. Each artist, for example, enjoyed significant professional success but had far from straightforward relationships with their respective art academies. Such relationships, in each case, were complicated by the various ways their

work diverged from some of the neoclassical conventions enshrined within the academic system. Their paintings, more generally, were often extremely popular among viewers but were still regarded by many as bizarre or strange and have been difficult to situate within metanarratives about the period. Clearly there were certain features of their work that contemporaries found to be quite gripping, but it is also apparent that viewers struggled to make sense of them – a kind of confusion that can itself be revealing. One particular advantage of bringing them together is that all three men were embedded in multinational European networks of exchange; through them we can see how British visual culture was intimately bound up with concurrent developments in France, Switzerland, and Italy. Looking at Girodet, Fuseli, and de Louthembourg together, in short, suggests productive ways to think about art of this moment outside of established modes.

It may even be that their singularity facilitated rather than hindered their production of artworks that reflect critically on the epistemological structures within which they were embedded.¹⁰ Something similar can be said of the sciences with which they engaged – animal magnetism, physiognomy, and electricity – which often teetered on the edge of credibility and in certain cases fell squarely on the wrong side of it. Some might object to classifying animal magnetism or physiognomy as a “science,” for instance, but it is precisely that historical ambiguity which is important for this book, for it situates them at the heart of contemporaneous debates about what counts as legitimate or illegitimate scientific practice and, by extension, knowledge production.¹¹ Moreover, many of the activities I examine straddled the boundaries of earnest academic study and pure recreation, boundaries that were not yet fully established or enforced. In order to recover them, I deliberately draw on a heterogeneous body of historical, literary, and artistic materials that vary greatly in their aims, their medium, and their audience.

One of the centripetal terms under which these diverse activities can be said to align is that of emergent European Romanticism. In literary studies especially, there has already been significant work done on the relationship between Romanticism and the sciences in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, just as literary studies has increasingly broadened its account of Romanticism to be more closely attuned to the visual.¹² Nonetheless, *art historical* “Romanticism” remains a thorny concept, one that is often regarded with unease: first of all, numerous aspects of eighteenth-century artistic neoclassicism were dominant well into the nineteenth century; and second, Romantic art lacks a cohesive set of

distinctive stylistic features.¹³ Consequently, in recent decades art historians have focused less on Romanticism as a style or movement and instead considered how late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century artists responded to an emergent consumer culture, the rise of public exhibitions, modern forms of spectatorship and visual entertainment, and various political transformations.¹⁴ Through their crucial research, a much more dynamic account of the cultural context of early pictorial Romanticism – a term to which I will return – has come into view.

Inseparable from this larger story is the decline of a specific strain of Enlightenment knowledge-making procedures that had undergirded a wide range of eighteenth-century observational practices. In examining the role of artworks within such a transformation, *Art, Science, and the Body in Early Romanticism* presents a less familiar account of what was “at stake” in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European art, enabling us to see works by Fuseli, Girodet, and de Louthembourg as active participants in a crisis over the evidentiary status of human experience itself. Doing so introduces a new set of questions around which to orient our understanding of a period often associated with the origins of modern visual culture. What kinds of truths does direct observation give us access to? Can we ever really trust the things our bodies tell us about the world? Does our individual experience map onto collectively accessible realities? What do we do when our physical experience stands at odds with scientific knowledge? In order to consider how artworks might actually contend with these questions, it is necessary first to sketch out a few of the broader developments underway in scientific and artistic practices.

Academic Bodies

One of the most significant changes afoot in the production and display of Western European art in the final decades of the eighteenth century and the opening of the nineteenth century was the proliferation of new kinds of public art exhibitions and the concomitant rise of a rapidly modernizing market for contemporary art. In addition to annual exhibitions sponsored by royal academies, for-profit urban galleries commissioned and displayed contemporary paintings to paying audiences, amateur art societies organized their own group exhibitions, and fine-art prints were available for purchase in unprecedented volumes. Especially in Great Britain (among the countries discussed in this book), artists were able to respond to public interest and demand within this marketplace and were often compelled to for financial reasons.¹⁵ Fuseli and de Louthembourg proved particularly

savvy in the London context, taking on profitable commissions, actively soliciting public interest and even scandal, and also sponsoring their own business ventures that presented visual spectacles directly to fee-paying audiences. Born into affluence, Girodet confronted a slightly different situation. He enjoyed a greater degree of financial independence and worked within the relatively centralized French system, in which the market for purchasing and commissioning art remained dominated by clerical and aristocratic patrons for most of the eighteenth century.¹⁶ Although it wasn't until near the end of Girodet's career that a truly modern bourgeois-driven art market would coalesce, the artist was nonetheless obligated to cultivate patrons, appeal to critics, embark on publishing ventures, and court a degree of sensationalism to draw in viewers.¹⁷ In short, artists were well aware of the ascendant economic power wielded by an expanding and increasingly heterogeneous audience for contemporary art. This audience constituted more than simply a marketplace. As Thomas Crow and David Solkin have argued, something that might be called an exhibition-going "public" was itself being called into formation in the final decades of the eighteenth century.¹⁸ (Though rather than an undifferentiated, monolithic "public," we should think of this development in terms of plural and overlapping publics.)

Growing public access to and engagement with contemporary art was accompanied by the waning cultural authority of a model of neoclassicism that had dominated academic discourse for much of the eighteenth century, and with it a specific vision of the moral function of history painting. Of course, "neoclassicism" (much like the term which with it is often coupled, "Enlightenment") has inexact conceptual and temporal borders.¹⁹ In its broadest sense, however, eighteenth-century neoclassicism centers on a renewed interest in the art of Greco-Roman antiquity. In Britain, academicians like Reynolds called for art to convey timeless moral and intellectual ideals through an appeal to general, universal forms. Although his adherence to neoclassical principles was hardly as strict as it is sometimes assumed, Reynolds did advocate for a stylistic emphasis on balance, clarity, restraint, and *disegno* – features that were intimately bound up with classicism.²⁰ These qualities, coupled with pictorial motifs and narrative content drawn from the Greco-Roman tradition, were widely taken to be synonymous with the highest form of artistic creation within the European academic system. Such features are similarly apparent in the late eighteenth-century paintings of Jacques-Louis David, the artist with whom French neoclassicism is often associated.²¹ However, the art historians John Barrell and Alex Potts, among others, would caution us against

treating eighteenth-century neoclassicism as a mere pictorial *style*.²² For Reynolds, David, and many of their contemporaries, references to Greco-Roman antiquity were the vehicle of a much deeper ideological aim: to create art capable of presenting a viewing “public” (even a narrowly conceived one) with a model of civic, humanistic virtues.

All three artists I examine were, like their peers, profoundly influenced by academic neoclassicism. This was especially apparent in their portrayal of the white male body, which was a significant compositional element in works by Fuseli and Girodet. After all, one of the most important expressive vehicles for eighteenth-century academic ideals was the heroic nude. In his seminal treatise *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* (1755), the German historian and archeologist Johann Winckelmann praised the ancient Greeks for combining ideal beauty with natural forms, exemplified in representations of the athletic nude body.²³ (Fuseli later translated Winckelmann’s *Remarks on the Writings and Conduct of J.J. Rousseau* into English in 1767.) According to Winckelmann, the idealized Greek male nude belonged to a bygone historical era in which the natural order and social order were in perfect accord – hence the body’s ability to express ethical and political virtues in ancient art. A corresponding emphasis on the idealized male body in eighteenth-century academic painting was therefore essential to reviving the civic and cultural achievements of Greco-Roman antiquity. The neoclassical male nude thus became a major conceptual and aesthetic forum in which philosophical principles, social hierarchies, political ideals, and religious precepts were both affirmed and contested.

The consummate importance of the idealized white male nude was reflected by its prominent place in the training regimen offered at Europe’s royal art academies. After studying engravings and then sculptures of the great nudes of classical antiquity and the Renaissance, students would eventually be allowed to study “from life,” to sketch from a live model. One of the highly regarded ways to demonstrate artistic mastery was to complete a finely rendered study of a male nude, a practice so closely aligned with academic values that it was actually called “an *académie*” (Figure 0.1). Yet within a Winckelmannian framework, Potts has reminded us, the political and subjective freedom that the male nude embodied sat uncomfortably with its patent eroticism and sensual appeal.²⁴ His mid-eighteenth-century text reflected the male body’s bifunctionality as both an object of aesthetic pleasure and a figuration of an ideal subject. Consequently, scholarship has placed overwhelming emphasis on the political and psychosexual aspects of the idealized male nude in this period,



Figure 0.1 François Boucher, *Academic Study of a Reclining Male Nude*, 1745–1755, chalk on laid paper. The Art Institute of Chicago.

with particular interest in the complex gendered and libidinal economies at play therein.

The classical body had long been a plural entity;²⁵ but around the turn of the nineteenth century – at the very moment that public engagement with contemporary art was experiencing unprecedented growth – new and concentrated pressures were exerted on artistic representations of the human body as well as the principles undergirding its role within academic discourse. Male nudes were increasingly characterized by their passivity, their carnal sensuality, their exaggerated features, and their role as victims of aesthetic and narrative violence. Fuseli and Girodet, for example, famously distorted some of the very elements that made the idealized male body so heroic: although they cited neoclassical conventions, their nudes were often contorted or defeated. Even de Louthembourg, who primarily painted landscapes and battle scenes, produced a small number of works featuring monumental nudes that deviated from academic precepts. I should stress that they were hardly alone in doing so. In the British

context, William Blake, Thomas Banks, and Benjamin West were among a number of artists who, in the final decades of the century, were portraying the male body in unusual, exaggerated ways. Likewise, in France, Girodet was not unique; Antoine-Jean Gros, François Gérard, and later Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres were a few of the many artists whose rendition of the heroic male nude was characterized by various forms of distortion. In the decades around the turn of the nineteenth century, “the beautiful male body ceded its dominant position in elite visual culture” – a development described by Abigail Solomon-Godeau as a “crisis in representation.”²⁶

The deteriorating cultural authority and semiotic stability of the idealized male nude is often attributed to broader sociopolitical realignments. Particularly in the context of the French Revolution, both large-scale history painting and a vibrant print culture became increasingly active in visualizing and mediating various forms of political self-understanding.²⁷ As the utopian aspirations of the Revolution waxed and waned, the political, iconographic, and psychosexual valences of the heroic, idealized male body are thus said to have undergone a dramatic transformation.²⁸ For Solomon-Godeau, this served an emergent bourgeois public sphere predicated on the exclusion of women. Crow offers a different explanation: that it reflected the lack of a stable revolutionary model of heroic action and a larger crisis of male sociability.²⁹ In the British context, Myrone points to the destabilization of a British concept of masculinity formerly predicted on political and military heroism.³⁰ Generally speaking, the trials endured by the idealized male nude are taken to be symptomatic of the political and psychic transformations of revolutionary and postrevolutionary Europe. Art historians such as Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, Darcy Grigsby, and Satish Padiyar have shown how the painted body acted as a privileged site for the inscription of colonial anxiety, psychosexual identity, revolutionary trauma, political contestation, subjectivity, and desire.³¹

The gradual decline of eighteenth-century academic neoclassicism and the putative ascendancy of Romanticism have often been expressed through a series of oppositions: reason versus imagination, didacticism versus entertainment, imitation versus expression, tradition versus originality, clarity versus ambiguity, and universalism versus individualism. Yet it should now be clear that we are dealing with a much more complex and multilayered set of developments that lack fixed and determinate boundaries. If the heroic, idealized male nude had once been a fraught but highly articulate representational vehicle, the erosion of its ability to function as such around the turn of the nineteenth century did not coincide with its disappearance from academic painting or popular forms of visual culture.³²

Nor would it be difficult to identify neoclassical features in the art of de Louthembourg, Fuseli, and Girodet. Yet their paintings also abound with traits that have since been attributed to early Romanticism: perceptual obscurities, strange luminous effects, dramatic contrasts, contorted bodies, raging natural forces, extreme affective states, and various stripes of pictorial and narrative ambiguity. Looking at the works of these artists and many of their contemporaries, we can see that major elements of eighteenth-century neoclassicism were no longer in operation – particularly if we take the term “neoclassicism” to refer to a constellation of ideas about art’s ability to address a public by appealing to a relatively stable conception of the world that is perceptible and knowable to the human subject – ideas that, I would venture, were very much bound up in a specific model of empiricism.

From this vantage point, painterly “Romanticism” looks somewhat different as well. Rather than dwell on its stylistic markers (or lack thereof), I follow recent scholarship beyond art history in taking Romanticism to express a fundamental realignment in the relationship between representation, sensory experience, and a stable, externally verifiable reality.³³ The insights of literary historians Gillen D’Arcy Wood and Peter Otto are especially productive in this respect.³⁴ Wood argues that popular forms of modern visual culture during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were characterized by increasingly spectacular and illusionistic “reality effects,” against which elite forms of literary Romanticism set themselves.³⁵ Even more relevant to the present study is Otto’s work on the aesthetic “worlds” of Romanticism. Despite my reservations about Otto’s provocatively anachronistic use of the term “virtual reality” to describe this state of affairs, he supplies a valuable insight, namely that experience *itself* was being reevaluated in a number of different cultural spheres.³⁶ As the historian Joan Scott writes, “what counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested and therefore always political.”³⁷ Romanticism grappled with a pervasive anxiety about the impossibility of unmediated access to external reality, on the one hand, and, on the other, the ease with which physical and psychic experience can be artificially manipulated.³⁸ Otto’s prompt to think about this development in relation to the category of experience more expansively enables us to consider how concerns within artistic production might have overlapped with those in other spheres of cultural activity and, specifically, within the sciences.