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Author(s): Stephanie Ross

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PAINTING THE PASSIONS: CHARLES LEBRUN'S *CONFÉRENCE SUR L'EXPRESSION*

BY STEPHANIE ROSS[1]

1. *Introduction.*—In this paper I shall examine a theory formulated by Charles LeBrun (1619–1690) on the method for painting the passions. I shall begin by sketching the theory's relation to both psychological and aesthetic works of the time. I shall place special emphasis on Descartes' theory of the passions, from which LeBrun drew heavily. Next I shall turn to LeBrun's codification of passion expressions and ask what he hoped to accomplish through such a detailed (and preposterous) specification of the facial changes accompanying each passion. To answer this question, I shall discuss the theory of painting held by LeBrun and his contemporaries. I shall argue that the conception of painting elaborated by the 17th-century Academicians created a central role for the portrayal of passion.

2. *Background.*—Charles LeBrun was a French painter and administrator of the arts during the reign of Louis XIV. Though acclaimed as a painter during his lifetime, he was most influential as Colbert's assistant in running the arts establishment of 17th-century France. His duties were both practical and pedagogical. All commissions for the decoration of any of the king's residences were channelled through LeBrun. He was primarily responsible for the entire ensemble of Versailles. However, I am more interested in another aspect of LeBrun's influence—his role as chancellor of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. At the urging of Colbert, LeBrun instituted a series of monthly lectures in order to instruct the students in both the theoretical and practical aspects of their profession. LeBrun himself gave a number of these lectures. In each he emphasized the importance of expression, but he devoted one of the lectures entirely to that topic. It was published in 1698, eight years after his death, under the title *Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière.*[2] I shall make this document the focus for my exploration of 17th-century aesthetics.

[1] This project was begun at an NEH Summer Seminar on "The Moral Force of the Passions". A version was read at the Eastern Division of the American Society for Aesthetics. I thank the NEH for support and Amelie Rorty and Peter Kivy for helpful comments. I have also benefitted greatly from the comments of Meyer Schapiro on the first draft of my article and for references to the literature.

[2] The lecture actually appeared two years earlier in Henri Testelin's collection *Sentiments des plus habiles peintres sur la pratique de la peinture et sculpture mis en tables de préceptes par Henry Testelin* (Paris, 1696), but Testelin mixes in other lectures with LeBrun's.

LeBrun's treatise lies at the intersection of two quite different traditions in philosophy and aesthetics. It is at once a piece of speculative physiology and a piece offering practical advice to painters. The first description puts LeBrun's work in the tradition of works of natural philosophy like Descartes' *Traité des Passions* (1649) and Hobbes' *Little Treatise* (1640). The second places his lecture in a quite different tradition stretching back to Alberti's *Della Pittura* written in 1436. These two characterizations of LeBrun's *Conférence* pull in different directions. As a contribution to seventeenth-century philosophy the treatise is a forward-looking document, one imbued with the new scientific spirit of the time, the hope that the geometric method and the science of matter in motion could together explain everything about human nature. Seventeenth-century aesthetic treatises, by contrast, were self-consciously backward looking: they sought to revive and codify the aesthetic teachings of the ancients. I am more interested in LeBrun's contribution to this second task because, as I shall go on to document shortly, he took most of his philosophy straight from Descartes. A good many of his artistic prescriptions, however, are original, perplexing, and worthy of investigation.

One note about sources. To assume that we have a set of doctrines formulated by LeBrun himself is misleading. Beside his *Conférence sur l'Expression* other presentations were recorded by the secretaries of the Royal Academy. The first, André Félibien, was publicly reprimanded for not submitting his record to the Academy for the correction of errors.[3] His successor, Henri Testelin, often interpolated his own opinions and objections into the records he preserved. Thus there are no documents which reliably preserve LeBrun's own doctrine. LeBrun did, however, establish an overall hegemony of artistic taste during his tenure as Chancellor of the Royal Academy. Despite disputes about such issues as decorum, verisimilitude, color, and line, the members of the Academy held a shared set of artistic values. The project which concerns me, that

[3] André Fontaine describes this incident in his preface to *Conferences Inédites de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* (Paris, 1903). He notes that the minutes of May 25, 1668 ordered that the collection of lectures edited by Félibein (1619-95) be examined by the Academy to correct the errors which could be found. In the future, the record went on to declare, Félibien would not be permitted to print the lectures until they had been given to the Academy to be examined. Special assemblies would be convened for this task. (xli, footnote #1)

Fontaine estimates Félibien's accuracy as follows:

One must not consider the collection of Félibien as a truthful reproduction of the proposals put forward to the Academy. But it is certain that the general outline of the sessions is suitably presented in his work, and even that the ideas which he attributes to interlocutors don't differ from those which were current in the Academy.

Henri Jouin, in his introduction to the *Conférences de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* (Paris, 1883) compares Testelin's reliability unfavorably with that of Félibien:

Testelin, no more than Guillet de Saint-Georges who succeeded him, didn't respect, as did Félibien, the extemporaneous remarks of the conference attendees.

of representing emotions through standardized pictorial practice, met with enthusiastic response throughout most of the Academy. Accordingly, I shall reconstruct the view of expression which I discuss and criticize from the following sources: LeBrun's published *Conférence sur l'Expression* as well as his discussions of other paintings; Félibien's long discursive introduction to the first volume of Proceedings of the Academy; and finally, Testelin's work *Sentiments des plus Habiles Peintres* (Paris, 1696).

3. *Descartes.*—Before turning to the content and organization of LeBrun's *Conférence*, let me briefly describe Descartes' theory of the passions as put forward in his *Traité des Passions*.[4] Since much of LeBrun's account is taken directly from this work, this will help us to see just where LeBrun is original. Descartes situates the class of passions proper within an elaborate taxonomy of the functions of the soul. Both body and soul are susceptible to both actions and passions. The actions of the soul are of two sorts: willing and thinking. The passions of the soul are distinguished according to whether their cause is the soul (e.g., perception of thoughts and desires) or the body. Those passions caused by the body are further distinguished according to whether they are caused directly (e.g., daydreams) or via the nerves. Those passions caused by the body via the nerves are in turn distinguished according to whether they are related to external objects (e.g., of sense-perception), to the body (e.g., hunger, thirst, pain), or to the soul. The latter category comprises the passions proper. Thus love, hate, anger, joy, and so on, are perceptions of the soul, related especially to it, and caused by the body ("caused, maintained, and fortified by some movement of the spirits," XXVII).

Descartes' physiological description of the passions is complex. He devotes much of Part I of his work to describing the details of body-soul interaction. He claims, first, that body and soul are united everywhere and not just in one part; but one particular bodily location is the seat of the soul—this is the pineal gland. Descartes maintains that the gland must play this role because those of our sensory organs which are double—two eyes, two ears, two hands—must need a place where the double images come together into one (XXXI). The 'messengers' of this system are animal spirits—particularly rarefied bits of blood, manufactured in the heart, which travel throughout our veins, nerves, muscles, and organs. The animal spirits move at different speeds and have different degrees of coarseness depending on the quantity of vital heat produced in the heart.

Descartes elucidates his system through the explanation of a particular example, fear of an animal (XXXV-XXXVI). He traces the animal's

[4] All references to Descartes' psychology are to the *Passions of the Soul* (1649) in *Philosophical Works of Descartes,* vol. 1, translated by Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (Cambridge, England, 1972). Quotations from this work will be identified by parenthetical numbers referring to Article headings in this edition.

effects on our sense-organs, pineal gland, and soul, and shows how the encounter will result in either courageous resistance or cowardly flight, depending on our past experience and on the particular desires we form. All passions follow this pattern: perception of an object sets up a bodily commotion. The animal spirits move from the cavities of the brain to the nerves which control the orifices of the heart, the flow of blood, the contraction of the muscles. The pathways taken by the animal spirits vary from person to person, but all passions cause the soul to "desire those things for which they prepare the body" (XL). Thus, if the approaching animal resembles things which previously hurt the body, the passion of fear will be excited in the soul; and if the person on previus occasions fled from fearsome things, the animal spirits will flow to the nerves which dispose the legs for flight. The overall function of the passions, Descartes claims, is to dispose us to will those things which will be good and to avoid those which promise us harm (LII). After describing the functions of soul and body and the interactions characteristic of passion, Descartes catalogs the passions in various ways. He distinguishes six primitive passions—admiration or wonder, love, hate, desire, joy, and sadness—and claims that all other passions arise from combinations of these.

4. *LeBrun.*—Let us examine LeBrun's theory against this background. LeBrun begins his *Conférence* by defining expression as "a naive and natural resemblance of the things one has to represent."[5] He claims expression in this broad sense is necessary for the art of painting because it shows the true character of things. But LeBrun's concern is expression in a narrower sense—expression of the passions. Such expression, he says, marks the movements of the soul and makes the effects of passion visible (4). LeBrun's aim is to show the artists and students of the Royal Academy how to use such expression, to show them, in short, how to paint the passions. To this end he first sketches a general theory of the passions, then turns to particular examples and traces, one by one, the expression characteristic of each.

Noting that many experts have written on the passions, LeBrun proceeds to present the received view of this topic. He defines passions as movements by which the soul pursues what it thinks will be good and flees what it thinks will be bad (6). He summarizes passion physiology and mechanics, mentioning the heating and rarefaction of the blood in the heart, its production of spirits, and their travel through the muscles and nerves to bring about bodily actions (6ff). In his exposition LeBrun diverges from Descartes in two respects. First, after repeating verbatim Descartes' argument that the soul must exercise its functions via the pineal gland, LeBrun instead endorses the conclusion that the soul receives impressions of the passions in the brain but feels their effects in

[5] Charles LeBrun, *Conférence sur l'Expression Générale et Particulière des Passions* (Verona, 1751). This version of LeBrun's manuscript is among the holdings of Harvard's Houghton Library. It is printed in French and Italian on facing pages. The translation from the French is my own. All further quotations from this work will be identified by page numbers referring to the Verona edition.

the heart (12). Also, LeBrun differs from Descartes in maintaining the distinction (owed to Aquinas) between two appetities in the soul—the concupiscent and the irascible. To the former category LeBrun assigns Descartes' primitive passions, with the exception of admiration; to the second category he assigns all the fierce and composite passions.

LeBrun goes on to describe various passions, offering first functional definitions and then an analysis of the movements of blood and spirits causally involved in those states. These passages are taken straight from Descartes. Let me give one example to show the extent of LeBrun's borrowings. Regarding *admiration* (for Descartes, the primary emotion), LeBrun says:

(1) Admiration is a surprise which makes the soul consider attentively objects which seem rare and extraordinary;
(2) And this surprise has such power that it often pushes the spirits towards the place where the impression of the objects is located;
(3) And causes them to be so occupied in considering that impression, that there are no longer any spirits passing into the muscles;
(4) Which causes the body to rest immobile like a statue and this excess of admiration causes astonishment;
(5) Which astonishment can arrive before we know whether this object is agreeable to us or not;
(6) Admiration is joined to esteem or scorn, according to the grandeur of the object, or its smallness;
(7) And from esteem comes veneration, and from simple scorn, disdain (14–16).

Passage (1) is the first sentence of Article LXX ("Of wonder, its definition and causes"). Passages (2)-(4) are a condensation of Article LXXIII ("What astonishment is"). Passage (5) is a sentence taken verbatim from Article LIII ("Wonder"). Passage (6) is the first sentence of Article LIV ("Esteem and disdain, generosity or pride, and humility or poor-spiritedness"), while passage (7) comes from Article LV ("Veneration and disdain")-leaving out the crucial point that these passions are directed only to objects which we consider as free causes.

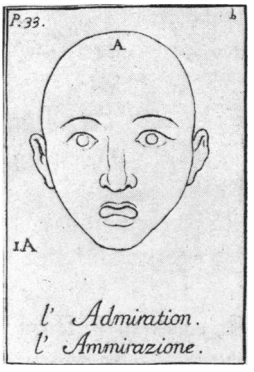
LeBrun's dependence on Descartes' *Traité des Passions* has been well documented. The French art-historians André Fontaine and Louis Hourticq both discuss LeBrun's debt to Descartes in books written early in this century. More recently, Rensselaer Lee and Jennifer Montagu have touched on this matter.[6] Some also claim that LeBrun borrowed from Marin Cureau de LaChambre, renowned physician to Louis XIV and author of the 1300 page work *Les Caractères des Passions* which appeared in five volumes from 1648 to 1659.[7] While there is an impressive array of scholarship showing LeBrun's ties to Descartes, none of the authors

[6] André Fontaine, *Les Doctrines d'Art en France* (Paris, 1909) Chaps. III-IV. Louis Hourticq, *De Poussin à Watteau* (Paris, 1921), Chap. II. Karl Bühler's *Ausdruckstheorie; das system an der Geschichte* (Jena, 1933) presents a critical survey of the theory of expression from ancient to recent times, including a discussion of LeBrun's lectures.

[7] Fontaine in fact reports that some of LeBrun's enemies within the Academy levelled anonymous charges against him to the effect that his theory of the passions was not his

just mentioned emphasizes the respects in which LeBrun diverged from Descartes. One aspect of LeBrun's theory is utterly distinctive: his account of facial expression. Descartes had devoted considerable space to the *bodily* expression of emotion. He seemed fascinated with physiological explanations of such phenomena as blushing, weeping, laughing, and so on (CXII—CXXXVI). He did, however, have specific reservations about conclusions based on facial expression. LeBrun ignored Descartes' cautions and developed a full blown theory. I shall first outline LeBrun's account of facial expression, then present Descartes' objections to such an enterprise.

LeBrun maintains that the face is where the soul shows its feelings most particularly, since the soul exercises its functions via the brain. LeBrun feels that one part of the face is of paramount importance in this regard: the eyebrows and not, he says, the eyes as some have thought (28). He postulates that the two movements of the brows, up and down, correspond to the two appetities in the sensitive part of the soul. In fierce and cruel (irascible) passions, the brows rise towards the center of the brain; with the other passions, the brows lower. Moreover, the movements vary with the passions, so that simple passions are expressed by simple movements of the brows, composite passions by composite movements, gentle passions by gentle movements, etc. (28-32). The mouth and nose are also expressive, LeBrun maintains, but these two body parts express the movements of the heart rather than those of the soul. Thus the mouth's corners are lowered when the heart complains, are elevated when it is contented, and are pushed in advance for aversion (36).



After stating these general principles as to which parts of the face mirror or express which facets of a passion-related commotion, LeBrun turns to specific passions and examines in detail their facial expressions. He treats some twenty different cases. Here are two examples of his

own, but was stolen instead from de La Chambre. Fontaine discounts this charge, in part because de La Chambre's views were common knowledge by the time of LeBrun's *Conférence*, in part because much of LeBrun's theory was obviously taken from Descartes. (101-102) Fontaine also notes (69) that LeBrun didn't reproduce de La Chambre's list when dividing the passions into the simple and composite, lodged in the concupiscent and irascible appetites respectively.

analysis—one for wonder or admiration, one for anger. About the first of these LeBrun says:

. . .admiration is the first and the most temperate of all the passions, where the heart feels less agitation: the face too receives very few changes in all its parts, and if there are any, it is only in the elevation of the eyebrow, but it will have the two sides equal and the eye will be a little more open than usual, and the pupil equally between the two lids and without movement, fixed on the object which has caused admiration. The mouth will also be partly open, but it will appear without any alternation, no more than all the rest of the other parts of the face. This passion produces only a suspension of movement to give the soul time to deliberate on what it has to do and to consider with attention the object which presents itself to the soul. Because if the object is rare and extraordinary, from the first and simple movement of admiration esteem will grow (38).

Here is his account of anger:

When anger possesses the soul, whoever feels this passion has red and inflamed eyes, the pupil distracted and sparkling, the eyebrows sometimes lowered, sometimes raised, one like the other. The forehead will appear strongly creased with folds between the eyes, the nostrils will appear open and enlarged, the lips press against one another and the lower lip surmounts the upper leaving the corners of the mouth a little open, forming a cruel and disdainful laugh.

He will seem to grind his teeth, saliva will appear in his mouth, his face will be pale in some places and inflamed in others and all swollen. The veins of the forehead, temples, and neck will be swollen and taut, the hair bristling. He who feels this passion puffs instead of breathing because the heart is oppressed by the abundance of blood which comes to its rescue (90).

These descriptions are consistent with LeBrun's opening principles. Descartes states that admiration is the only one amongst the primitive passions which does not involve the heart or blood. This is because it does not take good or evil as its object (LXXI). Therefore LeBrun mentions no disturbances of the mouth or nose. Since anger falls among the irascible passions, it ought to be expressed by the eyebrows rising at the middle. And, since it is a violent passion, it ought to reveal considerable commotion of the blood and spirits. LeBrun's description mostly meets these requirements. Yet notice all the details about the grinding of teeth, the movement of the pupil, the bristling of hair. The account seems tied only

occasionally and precariously to Descartes' complicated physiological and conceptual claims.

Compare Descartes' account. In Articles CXCIX-CCI, Descartes defines anger as a species of hatred or aversion accompanied by a desire to avenge oneself. He notes that it is particularly violent on account of this persistent desire and he describes in considerable detail its effects on the blood, bile, spleen, liver and heart. Yet Descartes goes on to claim that the external signs of anger differ according to differences of personal temperament and according to the diversity of other passions which unite themselves to the anger (CC). He explains that some people become pale and tremble in anger while others become flushed and even weep. LeBrun gives no notice of temperament and its effect on passion, and his comically specific portrait of an angry face ignores completely the latitude Descartes leaves here for differences among facial expressions of anger.

This difference in Descartes' and LeBrun's accounts of anger extends to all the other passions. While LeBrun describes a specific facial expression for each, Descartes' remarks suggest that no such formulae can hold. In section CXIII of the *Traité* Descartes states that every passion is evidenced by some particular action of the eyes, but that these actions are very difficult to describe because they are so complex. He then claims that actions of the face are of even less use in distinguishing passions one from another:

> . . .although the actions of the face which accompany the passions are of greater extent than those of the eyes, it is at the same time hard to distinguish them; and they are so little different that there are men who present almost the same mien when they weep as when they laugh. It is true that there are some which are remarkable enough, as are the seams in the forehead which come in anger, and certain movements of nose and lips in indignation and scorn; but they do not so much appear to be natural as voluntary . . . and may be changed by the soul when it desires to hide a passion (CXIII).

Thus here in the very text from which LeBrun borrowed his theory of the passions there is a caution against the enterprise he embarked on. Henri Testelin added the following objection to his account of LeBrun's lecture:

> One will note in finishing that it is not possible to prescribe precisely all the marks of the different passions on account of the diversity of form and temperament. A full face doesn't form the same folds as one which is thin and withered; a large eye raises to a height very different from one which is small and sunken; the bilious have movements quite other than the phlegmatic and the sanguine; similarly the stupid moves quite contrarily to one who has good sense. And thus the painter must have regard for all these differences to conform the expressions of the passions to the characters of the faces, to the perspective, and to the contours.[8]

[8] Henri Testelin, "L'Expression Générale et Particulière" from *Conférences de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*, ed. Henri Jouin (Paris, 1883), 164.

These critical comments by contemporaries of LeBrun are amply echoed by present-day thinkers. Many philosophers, critics, and art-historians claim that LeBrun's precepts are absurd, their effects detrimental.[9] How then are we to explain the enormous popularity LeBrun's *Conférence* enjoyed in its time? Despite Testelin's comments, LeBrun's theory was much admired and enormously influential. Upon hearing of LeBrun's doctrines, Louis XIV declared "such proofs of his wisdom show him to be the highest and the most grand of all men."[10] And the *Procès-Verbaux* of the Academy for Feb. 9, 1678 reports that Colbert, when presented with several of the drawings which LeBrun had used to illustrate his lecture, "exhorted LeBrun to have them engraved in order to present them to the public together with the explanation he had written, for they were most useful for the arts of painting and sculpture."[11] Thus LeBrun's program seemed to slake a thirst for theory felt by artists, students, and critics alike. By the mid-1700s the *Conférence* had been translated into English, Italian, German, and Dutch.

The discrepancy between the reception of LeBrun's theory in his time and in our own poses problems of interpretation. What made one century champion a doctrine which another finds ludicrous? How did LeBrun and his contemporaries interpret his project? How ought we to interpret it today? I shall turn to these questions in the following section.

5. *Evaluating LeBrun's Project.*—I can think of three ways of understanding LeBrun's *Conférence*. First, we might treat it as an empirical study. On this view, LeBrun is offering advice in the tradition of Leonardo, who exhorted painters to note the attitudes and gestures unique to each emotion, to study the diversity of facial expression and facial type.[12] I don't find this a convincing interpretation, first, because LeBrun's exposition leaves no latitude for individual variations in expression of the

[9] See, for example, Rensselaer W. Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis* (New York, 1967):" . . . nowhere did the aesthetic legislation of the Academy display itself in such absurdly detailed and absurdly abstract categories as in this attempt to specify the minute changes in facial expression by which each passion manifests itself through the complex action of those subtle vapors known as the *esprits animaux* which are the product of certain refinements of the circulatory system." (27) Or Fontaine: "It is to be feared that in paintings of the time many heads were drawn after this model. Doubtless it isn't likely that LeBrun spoiled any true geniuses . . . but with the painters of second order, who would have been able to produce interesting work by staying faithful to nature, one must deplore his influence." (70)

[10] Fontaine, 69.

[11] *Procès-Verbaux de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*, Vol. I, 1648-1792 (Paris, 1875), 128.

[12] Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting*, trans. A. Philip McMahon (Princeton, 1956). See Part II, 147-57 where Leonardo discusses such topics as the difference between laughing and weeping, the depiction of despair, the expressiveness of hands and arms. He claims repeatedly that any painting without movement appropriate to the mental state of its figures is "twice dead"; see e.g. 149.

sort that Descartes and Testelin acknowledged. LeBrun's test gives only one description for the facial expression accompanying each of the passions he considers,[13] and nowhere does he provide any algorithm for adjusting these according to age, sex, physiognomy, temperament, and so on. Moreover, the description which LeBrun does provide for each passion expression is not always typical or convincing. Recall his account of anger: inflamed eyes, bristling hair, grinding teeth, and more. Few people express anger in this manner. Surely these descriptive excesses undermine our first interpretation.[14]

A second interpretation of LeBrun's project takes him to be proposing a wholly conventional theory of expression, one that could be read from paintings but *not* from the human face. Such an account would excuse the inaccuracies of LeBrun's drawings and descriptions, for a conventional theory need not provide 'truthful' representations of the expression accompanying each passion. The account would also block the objections of Descartes and Testelin, presented above. However, LeBrun's penchant for physiological explanation undercuts this interpretation. A conventional account of expression—one designed to aid painters and sculptors rather than scientists or laymen—needn't tie the expression of passion to the coursing of blood, bile, and animal spirits. Yet LeBrun repeatedly does just this.

The third interpretation of LeBrun's *Conférence* is a compromise of sorts between the previous two. It takes LeBrun to be engaged in a

[13] This may not be the case with the drawings which LeBrun used to illustrate his lecture. The engravings after LeBrun's originals, recently published by Hubert Damisch [*Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, **21** (1980), 93-131], show three schematic drawings—two profiles and one full-face—for each passion. In one case, that of anger, two such sets are offered. Jennifer Montagu claims that the second drawing in profile merely shows a stronger and more bestial case of the same passion (Damisch 93, footnote #1) but Damisch argues that these additional sketches in fact show the sorts of variations which Testelin demanded. Thus Damisch counts four separate expressions offered for the passion of anger. It is not clear to me how the additional drawings should be interpreted, since they do not show figures of different age, sex, or physiognomy. The grounds for the variation are not apparent in the drawings themselves, nor are they explained in LeBrun's text.

[14] In addition to his concern with facial expression, LeBrun shared the 17th-century's interest in physiognomy and character. Physiognomic studies were thought to yield moral knowledge—to provide a shorthand for predicting an individual's character, temperament, and capabilities. LeBrun was surely familiar with Giovanni Battista Porta's *De humana physiognomia*, translated into French in 1655. (See Henri Jouin, *Charles LeBrun et les Arts sous Louis XIV* Paris 1889 p. 302) This work undoubtedly formed the basis of the lecture which LeBrun gave on March 28, 1671, comparing human and animal physiognomy. The text of the lecture is lost, but numerous drawings survive. These suggest that LeBrun was, in this case, very attentive to individual variations. See, for example, Jennifer Montagu's discussion of his cat- and monkey-like heads (Versailles catalog #133) where each of the several heads shown has the animal traits to a different degree.

rational reconstruction, trying to extrapolate a new and visionary science of expression based on the theoretical science of his day. This view explains LeBrun's project in terms of the rise of seventeenth-century science and the popularity of the Cartesian method. It assumes that a hunger for rules, precision, and axiomatization pervaded much of that century's thought, including the arts establishment. This is the view which emphasizes the ties between LeBrun and Descartes. It is also the interpretation which critics most frequently propose (without, of course, attributing the concept 'rational reconstruction' to LeBrun himself). For example, Brewster Rogerson in his article "The Art of Painting the Passions"[15] tries to explain the overriding interest which the Academicians, "the renowned French scholar-critics who clustered around the Court of Versailles,"[16] took in the expression of the passions. He attributes their concern to two factors. First, an analytical interest in human manners. And second, a desire to raise the prestige of the fine arts by emulating the model of the sciences, geometry, and mechanics in particular. Rensselaer Lee, in his monograph *Ut Pictura Poesis*, acknowledges the influence of Descartes much more explicitly:

> . . .behind the categorical exactitude with which [the painter-theorists of the Academy] formulated the visible manifestations of these invisible states of the soul, lay not only the rational thoroughness of the Cartesian method but also the central concept of the Cartesian physics that the whole universe and every individual body is a machine, and all movement, in consequence, mechanical.[17]

Later, Lee proposes an additional link between Descartes and the Academicians—this owed not to Cartesian method or Cartesian physics but to Cartesian epistemology. He grounds the 'logical order' of a unified painting in the procedures of a mind which follows Descartes' precepts.[18]

The author who makes the most of the connection between LeBrun's theory of expression and Descartes' philosophy is Louis Hourticq. In the second chapter of his book *De Poussin à Watteau*—aptly entitled "Descartes et LeBrun"—he speaks of the members of the Royal Academy as "peintres cartésiens" (68) and claims that Descartes provided both the

[15] Brewster Rogerson, "the Art of Painting the Passions", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, **14** (1953), 68-94.

[16] *Ibid*, 70.

[17] Rensselaer W. Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (New York, 1967), 28.

[18] Lee says ". . . another and far more significant aspect of the Cartesian philosophy exerted a dominant influence over the minds of the painter-theorists. This was the fundamental epistemological concept that the mind which knows itself more certainly than it knows the external world arrives at truth through the independently valid process of its own deductions, through its orderly procedure from one clearly-known proposition to another—a concept that was reflected in the view of the critics that every element in a painting whether formal or expressive must as the logical part of a rational order unfailingly contribute to the demonstration of a central dramatic idea." (29)

form and content for the Academy's construction of a 'science of art' ("une science acadèmique du beau"). To explain the Academy's position regarding such elements of painting as color, expression, and disposition, Hourticq cites a relevant Cartesian ground for each (the *Principles*, the *Passions*, and the *Meditations*, respectively).[19] Hourticq says of the *Traité des Passions* that its pages were well leafed by each of the Academicians, and that they were all familiar with the language of Descartes (52). He also quotes passages from lectures led by other Academy members, Gerald van Obstal and Nicholas Mignard, to show that they borrowed as freely from that work as did LeBrun.

I believe there is some point to this third interpretation, but I think Hourticq's conclusion is too strong. While Hourticq admits that LeBrun modifies Descartes' doctrine in places, he maintains that "none of these modifications takes him far from his model" (55). I have tried to show that the central focus of LeBrun's *Conférence*, the theory of facial expression, is very far indeed from Descartes' intentions. It applies Cartesian mechanics and terminology to a wholly new realm, an application which Descartes himself would not have favored. Moreover, throughout his chapter tracing the influence of Descartes on the Royal Academy, Hourticq stresses the analogy between a painting and a logical deduction. He says that the Academicians were anxious to elaborate an artistic doctrine which "would have the certainty of science and which could be demonstrated like mathematical truths" (42). Yet the experience of a painting is quite unlike that of a deduction or a mathematical proof.

Hourticq says, "A well ordered painting is nothing but a logical and compact system. Sufficient rigour in the composition leads naturally to a perfect unity—not to that picturesque unity which satisfies the eye through a harmonious ensemble, but to that logical unity which is analysed like the mechanism of a drama or a piece of reasoning" (65). I think that this passage with its two analogies for a well ordered painting—that of a drama and that of a rational argument—contains both a right and a wrong interpretation of LeBrun's enterprise. Certainly the influence of Descartes on the Academy has been established beyond doubt. We know LeBrun and his confrères read the *Traité des Passions*. They were probably familiar with others of Descartes' works as well. But we also know that LeBrun was not a stellar student of philosophy. Whenever Descartes' conclusions failed to suit his program, he cast them aside. Were the contemporary painters really rehearsing the Cogito and the *Discours* in their talks before the Academy? Hourticq and Lee are right to stress their interest in the 'logic' of painting, their search for rules governing invention, disposition, decorum, expression, coloring, and the like. But I don't think we have to turn to logic and philosophy to find the source for this interest. Its roots lay already in the 17th-century art world—in the heated debates regarding the theatrical unities, in the

[19] See 47-49, 52, 58-59.

burgeoning controversy between ancient and modern literary models, in the rationalist and classicizing impulses of Poussin and his champions, Fréart du Chambray and Du Fresnoy. I believe that attention to the demands arising within the art world itself is a useful corrective to the view which portrays the academicians as entirely engrossed in Cartesian philosophy and the new mechanical sciences. Accordingly, in what follows I shall turn from philosophical to artistic theory and explore the aesthetic principles and values held by the Academicians, and by looking at the view of painting current in LeBrun's time, I shall try to show why the demand arose for a theory like LeBrun's and what needs such a theory might have satisfied.

6. *The Theory of Painting.*—I begin with what LeBrun and his fellows took to be the purpose of painting. Much of my account will be drawn from Félibien's long chatty Preface to the first volume of collected Royal Academy Conférences. The first and foremost task which Félibien ascribes to the art of painting in seventeenth-century France is a political one: glorifying the reign of Louis XIV. He insists that the arts can "leave eternal marks of his power and teach posterity the history of his grand actions."[20] Here is the ringing conclusion of Félibien's defense of painting as one of the most elevated of the liberal arts:

> Painting, in shaping lofty thoughts and in treating the same subjects as history and poetry, is not content to report these with fidelity or to invent them with genius. Rather, she forms images so admirable that one thinks one sees the thing itself. And in exposing this to the eyes of everyone, she agreeably instructs the ignorant and satisfies the more learned.
>
> The instruction and pleasure which one receives from the works of painters and sculptors come not only from the science of design, the beauty of colors . . . but from the grandeur of their thoughts and the perfect knowledge which the painters and sculptors have of the things they represent. (22-23)

Félibien was a great champion of Poussin, and this artist shared the Academy's conception of painting as a noble art which both imitates and idealizes nature. An excerpt from one of Poussin's letters reads:

> Painting deals with human action, and above all with the most noble and serious human actions. It must present these according to the principles of reason; that is to say, it must show them in a logical and orderly manner, as nature would produce them if she were perfect. The artist must seek the typical and the general. Painting should appeal to the mind, and not to the eye. Hence it must not bother with trivialities, such as glowing color which is only a sensuous attraction, but must use only color and line as means of expressing the action of the painting.[21]

[20] André Félibien, Préface to *Conférences de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture de l'Année 1667* (Paris, 1669). Reprinted in the series Printed Sources of Western Art, Theodore Besterman, ed. (Portland, Collegium Graphicum). In the references from this work, numbers refer to the paragraph numbers of Félibien's preface in the Collegium Graphicum edition. The translations are my own.

[21] Nicolas Poussin, quoted in Anthony Blunt, *Art and Architecture in France 1500-1700* (Baltimore, 1953), 292.

Poussin's letter clearly echoes the *Poetics* of Aristotle: the insistence that the artist seek the typical and the general derives surely from Aristotle's prescriptions for the art of tragedy. The quote from Félibien recalls another ancient source: Horace's claim in *Ars Poetica* that poetry has two tasks, to instruct and to delight. The seventeenth-century Academicians were clearly infatuated with the ancient world. Félibien praises Greek painters as the highest of all (40) despite the fact that none of their works survived in his time. He admitted only two contemporaries into this pantheon, Poussin and Raphael. Part of every artist's training was a sojourn in Rome. LeBrun himself worked there from 1642 to 1646, and in 1666 the Academy established a separate branch in that city to accommodate the influx of young French artists. This enthusiasm for the ancients prompted the Academicians to borrow often from antiquity in formulating their artistic theory. They turned to Aristotle's prescriptions for drama, Horace's writings on poetry, Quintilian's advice to rhetoricians, and adapted them to an entirely different medium: heroic painting. The end result was an artistic theory with axioms much like the following: painting is a noble enterprise which shares its subject-matter with history and poetry; painting ought to imitate nature, but only nature at her most ideal; when necessary, painters ought to improve upon nature by appeal to the art of antiquity; only the most noble subjects are to be treated.

Nobility was assured through a hierarchy of genres and a host of subsidiary rules regarding decorum and verisimilitude. Félibien specifies the genres and claims that one who paints countrysides is worthier than another who does only fruits, flowers, or shells; one who paints living animals superior to one who paints only things dead and without movement; one who paints humans higher still. However, the highest perfection of art, he claims, "requires passing beyond a single figure to the representation of many together. One must treat history and fable. One must represent grand actions as the historians do, or agreeable subjects as the poets do. Mounting still higher, one must employ allegorical compositions to show under guise of fable the virtues of great men and the highest mysteries" (26).

Félibien here compares painting to both poetry and history. Yet recall that Aristotle distinguished these:

> The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose . . . the true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal I mean how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the names she attaches to personages.[22]

[22] Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, trans. S.H. Butcher, (New York, 1951), § IX, 35.

Félibien adapts Aristotle's distinction to describe the noblest of all paintings. Such works must depict historical incidents faithfully and accurately, but must go beyond mere reportage to reveal enduring psychological truths about human nature.[23] The ideal source for such paintings is the poetry of antiquity. Thus the hierarchy of genres brings with it a link between painting and poetry. Fontaine says of the Academicians of Félibien's time: "Never was the famous saying *Ut pictura poesis* repeated more often. The artists, gripped by the literary mania, tried ceaselessly to express the same ideas as the writers" (77).

Félibien's precepts admonishing the painter to imitate yet improve upon nature, to blend the reportorial accuracy of history with the generalizing abstractions of poetry, already contain within them the seeds of contradiction. Surely veracity and idealization will pull in different directions. Yet even here we might find a first foundation for LeBrun's enterprise, for the search for general truths about human nature, when applied to the study of expression, could yield only a schematized system showing not the idiosyncratic reactions of individual men but the expressive traits resulting from universal features of passion—cause, context, and physiology.

Still, if this were all there were to the matter, then the Academy's overwhelming interest in expression would only be a sign of their antecedent interest in general truths about human nature. I do not think this sufficiently explains the central role expression plays in so many of the Academy's sessions. I believe the influence of another art and a further borrowing from Aristotle served to create this role for expression. I have in mind drama, and the doctrine of the unities.

7. *The Unities.*—Aristotle's statements about unity in the *Poetics* are more suggestive than systematic. He claims that imitation is one when the object imitated is one, so a plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action, and as a whole[24]; a plot, he says, ought to have for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end.[25] He also states that a tragedy should confine itself to a single revolution of the sun.[26] These remarks from different sections of the *Poetics* were transformed by 17th-century French dramatists into a set of rigid requirements—the unities of time, place, and action. These unities were preserved in verse by Boileau and debated and discussed by Corneille, Chapelain, D'Aubignac, and others.

I don't know whether the painters of the Academy acquired their interest in the unities from contemporary playwrights or directly from

[23] See in this regard Paul Desjardins' essay "La méthode classique de Nicolas Poussin" in his book *La Méthode des Classiques Français* (Paris, 1904) esp. § I pp. 171-95 with his discussion of the painting "Toxaris" and his comparison of Poussin and Corneille (175, 179).

[24] Aristotle, § VIII, 35. [25] *Ibid.*, § XXIII, 89. [26] *Ibid.*, § V, 23.

Aristotle. Suffice it to say that they took these rules[27] and incorporated them into their own pedagogy and criticism. Félibien states the doctrine most generally in terms of requiring a single subject: What one calls in a painting History or Fable is an imitation of an action which has occurred, or could have occurred, amongst several persons. But one must take care that in a painting there is only a single subject, and even if it is filled with a great number of figures, all must have a connection with the principal one (31). Félibien goes on to remark that fables, like plays in the theatre, lack perfection unless they have a beginning, a middle, and an end. He claims that paintings are most effective when they have a comparable virtue—when their figures are so arranged that one can tell what preceded the action represented (32). Here Félibien explicitly takes a regulatory ideal of the theatre and adapts it to the art of painting. Testelin follows the dramatists even more precisely in his approach to the unities. He elicits a trio of rules for painting corresponding to those operative in the literary arts:

> In writing one can make an ample description of all the circumstances which occur in a flow of time, which one can only conceive of successively. But in painting one must understand all of a sudden the idea of the subject. Thus a painter must restrict himself to these three unities—to know what happens in a single time, what the view can discover in a single glance of the eye, and what can be represented in the space of a tableau, wherein the idea being expressed must be gathered together in the place of the hero of the subject, just as perspective subjugates everything to a single point.[28]

Thus the dramatic unities of time, place, and action give rise to the painterly unities of time, glance, and tableau.

Testelin's rules were meant to bridge the gap between the two media and their very different resources with regard to space and time. The Academicians hotly debated the worth of paintings which seemed to violate these prescriptions. Some of these debates were in fact about decorum and verisimilitude, but others show an important tie between the unities and expression. Expression was the 'glue' needed to achieve unity amongst a multitude of figures, to make sure that all the characters focussed, both visually and emotionally, on the central episode and thus contributed to the single action. Note the closing analogy in Testelin's statement of the painterly unities: "the idea being expressed must be gathered together in the place of the hero of the subject, just as perspective subjugates everything to a single point". Testelin is calling attention to the following parallel: correct perspective achieves spatial logic and unity by making all sight lines converge to a single vanishing point on the horizon; correct use of expression achieves emotional logic and unity by making all figures respond to a single situation, the predicament of the

[27] See John Lough, *Seventeenth-Century French Drama—The Background* (Oxford, 1979), Chap. V, "The Rules".

[28] Testelin, 154.

hero. Both sorts of unity, spatial and emotional, contribute to the perfection of pictures, for both are ingredients in that baffling notion 'unity of action'.

Let me expand a little more on the notion of painterly unity of action. As stated above, the painters of the Royal Academy took the mission and subject matter of their works to be continuous with those of poetry and history. Yet the very different representational resources of these media required that the painters achieve the prescribed unities in a quite different manner. Paintings can represent a great many incidents, but these will be perceived as occurring simultaneously unless there are explicit cues or conventions to inform the viewer to the contrary. Poetry, history, and drama, on the other hand, can present incidents which unfold gradually in time, though only one such incident can be 'in focus' at any given moment. Rather than one protagonist's action continuing over a number of hours, paintings had to provide nuance and detail by showing us many people reacting to the 'freeze-frame' of a moment. The unity of action demanded by 17th-century theorists thus turned on the emotional ties amongst the figures portrayed rather than on the ongoing adventures of a single hero. And thus the need for a systematic way of representing the various passions in all their detail. Félibien certainly voices this need in his Preface. He states that "the expressions of the particular figures which merely accompany the principal figure must be simple, natural, and judicious, and must have an 'honest rapport' with the figure which serves as the body of the work in which these others are like the limbs." (36) Félibien's anatomical metaphor calls for an organic unity amongst the figures in a painting such that the subsidiary ones function like a necessary part of a larger whole rather than as independent and distracting units with lives and adventures of their own.

8. *LeBrun's Lecture.*—To document some of my claims, I refer to a situation where LeBrun applied his theory. In 1667 he lectured on Poussin's painting "The Israelites Receiving Manna in the Desert" which was then in the collection of the king.[29] The painting illustrates an episode from Exodus, Chapter XVI: the Jews have followed Moses into the wilderness, and God has provided a shower of manna to ease their hunger. The canvas shows many figures ranged in a grey, rocky landscape. In the left foreground, a woman succors her infant and her aged mother while a man looks on admiringly. To the right people crouch on their hands and knees to gather the manna which has fallen to the ground. In the middle distance men cluster with their arms upraised, giving thanks

[29] Regarding the importance of this lecture, cf. Jacques Thuillier's remark in the catalog of the 1963 LeBrun exhibit at Versailles: "The discussion that followed is one of the most important, amongst those which have been preserved, for our knowledge of the theories of the time. (LX) Fontaine, Hourticq, and Lee all write about this lecture; it was discussed more recently in Joseph Allard's paper "Mechanism, Music, and Painting in 17th Century France", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, **40** (1982), 269-79.

to God; others fall to their knees. Poussin said about this painting:

I have found a certain distribution for M. de Chantelou's painting and certain natural attitudes which will show the misery and hunger to which the Jewish people were reduced and also the joy and vivacity where they found themselves, the admiration with which they are touched, the respect and the reverence they have for their Legislator—with a mixture of women, children, and men of different ages and temperaments, which will I think please those who know how to read it.[30]

Thus Poussin himself was concerned here to portray and to integrate a variety of figures expressing a variety of emotions.

LeBrun divides his discussion of the painting into four sections: (1) the disposition, general and particular; (2) the design and proportion of the figures; (3) the expression of the passions; (4) the perspective, the air, and the harmony of colors.[31] The fact that LeBrun devotes a separate section to the expression of the passions reflects the importance he accords to this topic. Under the first heading, LeBrun largely tells us what we see, e.g. that these are the Jews, that they are in a desert, that they are languorous because they are weary and hungry, that the pale weak light instills sadness. He comments on the interrelations of the groups of figures and states that their overall disposition gives rise to harmony and unity of action.[32] Commenting on the Design, LeBrun claims that Poussin has taken each of the figures from famous works of antiquity: Laocoön here, Niobe there, Seneca there, and so on. Turning to the subject of the passions, he says that Poussin has created the figures so appropriately that the action of each is tied to the pitiful state of the Jewish people. A detailed accounting of their movements will, LeBrun maintains, tell us not only who these people are but what they think.[33]

What were the specifics of LeBrun's analysis? Here is his account of an old man who watches a woman offering her breast to her ailing mother:

This man represents a person surprised and struck by wonder—his arms are pulled back and placed against his body because, in great surprise all the limbs ordinarily draw back one against the other, primarily when the object which surprises us only prints an image in our minds which makes us admire what is happening, and when the action doesn't cause us any fear or fright which could

[30] Letter to Poussin's friend Jacques Stella, quoted in Anthony Blunt's catalog for a Louvre exhibition *Nicolas Poussin* (Editions des Musées Nationaux, 1960), 90. My translation from the French.

[31] Charles LeBrun, Conférence on Poussin's "The Israelites Receiving the Manna in the Desert", *Conférences de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*, Henri Jouin, ed. (Paris, 1883), 50.

[32] "This judicious contrast [between the principal and accompanying members of each group of figures]—which gives movement and from which issue the different dispositions of the figures in which the situation, the aspect, and the movements conform to the story—creates the unity of action and the beautiful harmony which one sees in this picture". (52)

[33] *Ibid.*, 56.

trouble our senses and give them reason to seek aid or defend themselves against the menace. Also one sees that, having nothing but admiration for a thing so remarkable, he opens his eyes as wide as he can, as if, in looking more strongly, he will understand more thorougly the grandeur of the action . . . the other parts of his body, abandoned by the animal spirits, rest without movement. His mouth is shut, as if he feared that there would escape something of what he had understood, and also because he can't find words to express the beauty of this action. And, since in this moment the passage for respiration is closed, this makes the parts of the stomach more raised than ordinarily, as appears in several muscles which are uncovered.[34]

This will certainly suffice to give the flavor of LeBrun's analysis. His comments make some reference to Cartesian physiology; he mentions the animal spirits and talks elsewhere of the vital heat. Taking into account the fact that this lecture preceded the lecture on expression by some years,[35] his psychological insights are in keeping with the theory outlined there. They may seem extravagant to us today (since they are not the stuff of which our art criticism is made) but they represent well the task which Poussin set himself in this work and which the Academicians took to be the task of all noble painting (recall Poussin's letter to Jacques Stella, quoted above, n. 30).

LeBrun grapples with larger issues later in the lecture when a question from the audience prompts him to compare the narrative resources of painting, history, poetry, and drama. The questioner charges that Poussin misrepresents the Biblical text on two counts. First, the Bible tells us that the Israelites found the manna in the morning, therefore it had fallen to earth during the night. Yet here Poussin shows it raining down in the morning (as LeBrun's analysis of the light and mist substantiates). And second, when the manna fell in the desert, the Israelites had already been succoured by a provision of quail. Yet Poussin errs and shows them still in a dire state of hunger and need.

LeBrun responds to these charges by detailing an important difference between painting and history: the historian makes himself understood by representing successive actions in a series of descriptions, while the painter has only an instant in which to represent what he wants to portray. He must often join together many incidents which preceded one another. Otherwise, says LeBrun, his work would be uninstructive, like that of an historian who did not recount the whole subject of his history but contented himself with only telling the ending. LeBrun concludes that

[34] *Ibid.*, 56-57.

[35] While the date generally given for LeBrun's lecture is 1678, Jennifer Montagu has argued that it was initially given much earlier, on April 7, 1668. (See Montagu's note in the catalog for the 1963 Versailles exhibit "Charles LeBrun Peintre et Dessinateur", 303.) This would accord well with the tenor of LeBrun's observations on Poussin's painting. Also, in 1678 ff., the Academicians took to *re*-reading previous lectures rather than preparing new material. (See André Fontaine's introduction to the *Conférences Inédites*, xxxviii-xxxix.)

Poussin has told his story the only way that a painter can. He has captured the scope of the event by representing in a single scene the diverse states of the Jews at different times. Some of the figures exhibit the languour that preceded the miracle, others busily gather the manna, while still others, already nourished, give thanks to God. Rather than criticizing Poussin for these inconsistencies in his composition, LeBrun suggests that they are essential to the narrative function of painting.[36]

This discussion indirectly indicates the importance of expression. LeBrun claims that the varied states and actions of the Jews which Poussin has represented take the place of words and discourse: "Painting has no other language or characters than these sorts of expressions."[37] However, the role of expression becomes much more clear when a comparison is made with yet another artistic medium, the theatre. LeBrun doesn't initiate this discussion.[38] Rather, a member of the audience notes that rules of the theatre permit poets to join together several events from different times to create a single action, so long as contradiction is avoided and *vraisemblance* observed. A parallel freedom is claimed for painters. When Poussin's composition is considered in this light, the Academicians judge that "nothing impedes the unity of action, nothing offends against *vraisemblance*, everything concurs in representing a single subject."[39] LeBrun concludes that Poussin

> has shown himself to be a true poet, having composed his work in keeping with the rules observed in the theatre. To represent perfectly the story he treats, he needed the parts necessary to a poem, in passing from misfortune to happiness. The groups of figures, which perform diverse actions, are like so many episodes which serve as what are called *peripeteia.*[40]

Here LeBrun explicitly endorses the analogy between painting and theatre. He assumes that rules of the theatre—the unities, *vraisemblance, bienséance*—apply validly to paintings, and he uses theatre terminology to describe the elements of Poussin's composition. It is the theatre analogy which makes expression of central concern to LeBrun and his peers. If unity of action is declared the chief virtue of painting, then expression becomes an indispensable tool in achieving that virtue.

Other writers use similar analogies to explain the paintings of Poussin and those of LeBrun himself. For example, Paul Desjardins, in his essay "La Méthode Classique de Nicolas Poussin" distinguishes two different methods by which Poussin achieves unity in his compositions. One yields dramatic unity, the other unity of sentiment.[40] The first is the sort of

[36] LeBrun, Manna, 62-63.

[37] *Ibid.*, 63.

[38] Félibien's record of the conference reads "Someone added to what M. LeBrun had just said that if the rules of the theatre permit poets to join together several events . . ." (64) Perhaps the interjection comes from Félibien himself. It is hard to determine when, if at all, we return to the voice of LeBrun. I shall treat the entire theatre discussion as an extension of LeBrun's remarks, for I am more interested in sketching a general account of painting endorsed by all the Academicians than in tracing the doctrinal differences amongst them.

[39] LeBrun, Manna, 64.

[40] *Ibid.*

unity we have been discussing; it is achieved when different people react with a variety of passions to a single incident. (Desjardins explains this concept through the example of Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*.) Desjardins notes about the paintings where Poussin employs this method that "a grand painting of a pure painter overwhelms us in a single instant and silences us; but [these paintings of Poussin] invite us to babble."[42] Later, alluding to the psychological wealth of "The Israelites Receiving Manna in the Desert", Desjardins says that one must 'ferret out', that it takes one hundred successive analytical glances to grasp the unique story.[42] Thus here a later critic employs the analogy between history, painting, and drama and calls attention to the psychological effects which LeBrun labelled "*peripeteia*".

The method which Desjardins calls dramatic[43] was held up as a model by the Academy and emulated by LeBrun himself in his own paintings. Interestingly, in a lecture before the Academy comparing LeBrun's "The Family of Darius at the Feet of Alexander" with Veronese's "The Pilgrims from Emmaus", Charles Perrault claimed of LeBrun's painting,

> This is a veritable poem in which all the rules are observed. The unity of action—that's Alexander entering the tent of Darius. The unity of place—that's this tent where we find only the people who should be there. The unity of time—that's the moment where Alexander says that no one is mistaken in taking Hephaestion for him. . . . If one sees with what care one has made all things tend toward a single goal, nothing is more tied, more united, more 'one', than the representation of this story; and at the same time nothing is more diverse and varied if one considers the different attitudes of the people and the particular expressions of their passions.[44]

Here again the painting-theatre analogy and the invocation of the Aristotelian unities are absolutely explicit.

9. *Lee's Objection.*—Rensselaer Lee aptly summarizes LeBrun's analysis of "The Israelites Receiving the Manna in the Desert":

> . . . Poussin has achieved pictorial unity not only because the different movements and facial expressions of the figures are always referred to the principal subject, but because the painter has selected his 'expressions' in such a way that the picture has this further claim to an impeccable logic of structure: like a drama on the stage, it observes the Aristotelian unity of action in having a beginning, a middle, and an end.[45]

Yet Lee goes on to disparage the painting-theatre analogy, claiming "it is straining the possibilities of expressions further than the medium of painting can bear when Félibien's theorist reads the beginning, middle, and end of a drama, considered as developing in time, into the actions and expressions in Poussin's picture." Lee insists that the application of Aristotelian unity of action to the art of painting is "aesthetically fallacious".[46]

[41] Desjardins, 227-28. [42] *Ibid.*, 209. [43] *Ibid.*, 229.
[44] Hourticq, 66. Hourticq does not give the date or source for Perrault's lecture.
[45] Lee, 30. [46] *Ibid.*, 64.

A full evaluation of Lee's criticism is beyond the scope of this paper, but I would like to close by briefly reviewing his charges against the Academicians in order to show some further connections between expression and unity. In the course of his discussion, Lee implicitly distinguishes two senses of unity of action. The first, which I shall call painterly unity of action, obtains whenever the actions and expressions of a painting all bear on the principal subject. The second, which I shall call dramatic unity of action (not to be confused with Desjardins' use of that term)[47] is a temporal concept. It obtains when a succession of events in time moves consistently to an inevitable end, with nothing casual or unrelated included.[48] Lee mentions a third notion in criticizing LeBrun: the possession of a beginning, a middle, and an end. This seems to me logically distinct from either version of unity that Lee defines.

What sorts of unity can be attributed to Poussin's painting? The picture has a single subject—the Israelites in the desert. It confines itself to a single episode—God's provision of manna. The many figures in the painting are all reacting to the miracle by showing their need for the manna, their joy in it, their thanks for it. Thus painterly unity of action is achieved. But how might it be violated in a painting of this sort (a history painting involving many figures)? Of course, we can imagine crude violations: the presence of a figure who belongs in a different painting—a Phoenician sailor, or a Greek maiden. But what might count as an *emotional* violation? Suppose Poussin had painted an Israelite who stared moodily off into space paying no attention to the fallen manna. Or an Israelite who stared lasciviously at her companion, again ignoring the miracle. Would these be figures whose actions did not bear on the principal subject? The question seems unanswerable, since moody introspection or lascivious sighing might each be genuine reactions to the shower of manna. And this suggests that painterly unity of action applies automatically ('tautologically') to history paintings so long as they contain no gross errors of verisimilitude (Phoenician sailors amidst the desert-wandering Jews).

LeBrun clearly means to attribute something more to Poussin's painting. He lauds Poussin's skill in portraying varied expressions, in indicating not only the subjects' emotions but their thoughts as well. But he also recurs to a notion, that Félibien articulated in his preface, that effective history paintings indicate not only what is happening at a given moment but what preceded the action represented. Thus the expressive variety of Poussin's painting enhances its narrative effects. LeBrun implies that the work would be less excellent had it shown the Israelites either all starving or all sated. It would not then tell so clearly the Israelites' story.

Does this in effect accord dramatic unity of action to Poussin's painting? Lee claims that this sort of unity does not apply to painting, and

[47] *Ibid.*, 65.

[48] These are the terms most obviously called for by Lee's discussion. Unfortunately, they do not coincide with Desjardins' usage. What he understands as dramatic unity, Lee would consider painterly unity.

that the Academicians' Procrustean efforts to force its application caused them to misconstrue the nature of the medium and declare "that painting like poetry is an art of successive events in time."[49] Yet Poussin did manage to achieve temporal references of a sort. His painting does not (as Lee rightly notes) have a beginning, a middle, and an end. But it does effectively indicate the state of the Israelites both before and after the miracle. What the painting cannot capture is a second aspect of Lee's definition, its suggestion of inevitability. Dramatic unity requires that each episode flow logically and irrevocably from what preceded. It is violated by irrelevant subplots or *deus ex machina* resolutions. While paintings can indirectly recall the past or foreshadow the future, they cannot convey this logical relation amongst the episodes of a plot. Thus, technically, Lee is right; paintings do not have dramatic unity of action. But his discussion neglects the extent to which the seventeenth-century painters and critics took aspects of that notion and successfully applied them to their medium.[50]

One might object that LeBrun picked a special case, that few paintings would fit his doctrine as well as Poussin's portrayal of the Israelites. But this is not right. Recall that seventeenth-century painters identified the subject matter of their art with that of poetry and history. It follows that the best and noblest paintings will depict incidents suitable to the highest of literary genres and that they will invoke what LeBrun called "the parts necessary to a poem": the passage from misfortune to happiness, or vice versa. Thus all history paintings will need a science of expression, a system for portraying the varied ways in which people express misery, joy, and all the passions in between.

10. *Conclusion.*—I have been trying to put LeBrun's theory of expression in context by showing what was expected of seventeenth-century painting and how attention to expression helped the artist to achieve those goals. The term "expression" was used in two senses by the Academicians in LeBrun's circle; they talked of a painting properly expressing a single idea or subject, and also of particular faces and postures expressing particular emotions. I have claimed that expression in the latter sense was a tool used for achieving expression in the former sense. The Academicians' emphasis on rules, as evidenced by their desire that each lecture yield a series of 'positive precepts' for aspiring students, helps to account for LeBrun's zeal in setting out in such detail the physiognomic nuances of each passion. But I believe that the Academicians' interest in the unities also sparked and sustained their interest in the concept of expression. Their desire for regimentation and schematization came not from a newly felt envy of science or a newly found concern with philosophy, but from conventions and controversies which had long been stirring their sister art.

University of Missouri, St. Louis.

[49] Lee, 64.

[50] *Ibid.*, 65.