

PRESS KIT**SWAN SONG. ACADEMIC PAINTINGS OF THE SALON DE PARIS. MUSÉE
D'ORSAY COLLECTION**

The FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE Cultural Area has the pleasure to invite you to the press conference for the exhibit **SWAN SONG. ACADEMIC PAINTINGS OF THE SALON DE PARIS. MUSÉE D'ORSAY COLLECTIONS**, that will be held on **FEBRUARY 13, 2015** at **noon** at the **FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE AUDITORIUM** (Paseo de Recoletos, 23). The press conference will include general exhibit commissioners Pablo Jiménez Burillo, FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE Cultural Manager, Guy Cogeval, president of the Musée d'Orsay, and Côme Fabre, the exhibit's scientific commissioner.

Inauguration	February 13, 2015; from 5 to 9 p.m.
Press conference	February 13, 2015 at noon.
Dates	February 14 through May 3, 2015
Location	Paseo de Recoletos, 23
General commissioners	Pablo Jiménez Burillo and Guy Cogeval
Scientific commissioner	Côme Fabre
Production	FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE and Musée d'Orsay
Website	http://www.exposicionesmapfrearte.com/elcantodelcisne
Facebook	http://www.facebook.com/fundacionmapfrecultura
Twitter	http://twitter.com/mapfreFcultura
Instagram	www.instagram.com/mapfrefcultura

This exhibit has been organized and made possible with the scientific collaboration and exceptional loans from the Musée d'Orsay.

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**SWAN SONG. ACADEMIC PAINTINGS OF THE
SALON DE PARIS. MUSÉE D'ORSAY COLLECTIONS**

From February 14 through May 3, 2015

From February 14 through May 3, 2015, FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE (Paseo de Recoletos, 23, 28004, Madrid) will host the exhibit *SWAN SONG. ACADEMIC PAINTINGS OF THE SALON DE PARIS. MUSÉE D'ORSAY COLLECTIONS*, offering a selection of France's best academic paintings from the second half of the nineteenth century.

This is the first time an exhibit of such characteristics will be presented, representing a fresh perspective in the international scene. This exhibit brings together masterpieces from academic painters of the salons of nineteenth-century Paris. History would appear to have traditionally assigned them with the role of just enough counterpoint necessary to react to impressionism and the remaining tendencies that seem to lead directly to the vanguards and art of the twentieth century. However, this style of splendid and refined painting marks one of the most brilliant pages in Art History as the final heir of the tradition of great paintings.



Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Young Greeks Encouraging Cocks to Fight*, 1846, Paris, Musée d'Orsay © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay) / Stéphane Maréchal

The scope of academic painting encompasses a series of artists who sought various ways to modernize a tradition based on the belief in an ideal of eternal beauty shared by all that was perfectly embodied in Greek sculpture. This all took place during a period in which the world was undergoing profound transformations stemming from the succession of political, economic and social revolutions of the nineteenth century, during which the development of archeology had revealed a heterogeneous and changing Antiquity, and in which the esthetic and moral formulas imposed from neoclassicism were running their course in art. These artists thus faced the challenge of creating a balance between tradition and the necessity of new models, capable of evolving in a society undergoing constant change and transformation.

This painting is therefore not a uniform series working according to the same norms and models, but the attempt to rework certain principles –fundamentally those of an eternal and universal beauty– to a fully evolving society. Further, while these painters were not always popular among the public, Academia or critiques, they nevertheless attempted, in their own manner, to adapt the tradition of the great paintings to a world that seemed to be discovering the volatility of tastes and fashion.

By the midpoint of the nineteenth century, the French Academy of Fine Arts gradually grew to become a public institution dependent on certain eminently bourgeois powers. The Salon, which depended on it and within which lies the origins of the 1763 exhibition held in the Salon *Carré* of the Louvre, from whence it got its name, is an institution that was gradually becoming more open and began to disseminate tendencies and styles, eventually harnessing a particular influence on French culture and the rest of Europe. At this point in time, the Salon would become the forum that joined the various forces that were to dictate tastes: the jury, representing the moribund Academy, prominent public figures, main buyers of the exhibited works and, for the first time, the public and the newborn art critic as the key players in the democratization of art in the meaning that we currently ascribe to it.

The artists, writers and intellectuals of the period were highly sensitive to the malaise caused by the modern world, positivism and industrialization (Baudelaire's famous *spleen*), and this disconcerting world brimming with

changes that was gradually losing the bedrocks of certainty inherited from tradition. And the response to all these matters was a flight into the past, but also to the faraway and exotic.

While not a rejection of the modern world, they instead helped configure it by replacing the traditional and Academy-endorsed model that was perfect, stable and harmonious with another model, one that was unstable, tumultuous and often violent and delirious through paintings that reflected a society and world that would disappear in the twentieth century with the arrival of the First World War. But also a painting that, in its adherence to the nude, narrative and dependency on major government purchases, would be kept somewhat alive during the entire twentieth century.

Thus, and for example, the tendency has recently returned to the classic nude and a zeal for the narrative in artistic activities, a language that is often used in motion pictures and photography, or artists such as Jeff Koons, echoing the academic painting discourse and “in the defense of *kitsch* without complexes”. In view of this, it would appear to be the right time to revisit this painting tradition and reflect its complexity and richness in the drive to express and override the ever-changing modern world.

The most important works of the academic tradition in Paris were acquired by the State and later passed to French public collections, and, since its creation in 1986, to the funds of Musée d'Orsay, which is virtually compelled to undertake this exhibit. This museum has generously and exceptionally lent over 80 works of the most prominent academic artists who had exhibited in the Salon de Paris such as Ingres, Gérôme, Cabanel, Bouguereau, Laurens, Henner, Meissonier and Baudry, as well as other painters who, while not normally classified as academic artists, were nevertheless integrated in the Salon exhibit system and used traditional conventions to explore new horizons, namely Alma-Tadema, Gustave Moreau, Puvis de Chavannes or Courbet.

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

Given that there is really no delimited corpus of academic artists or clearly differentiated stylistic characteristics, the exhibition has been organized on the basis of the major genres that the Academy had traditionally established, which are no less than the major subjects of the great painting tradition.

Thus, the exhibit affords a voyage through the paintings of the Salon, underscoring dialog, ambivalences and meetings among its prominent actors.

Living Antiquity

Throughout the twentieth century, the classic ideal survived within an artistic imaginarium, though renewing itself through a more liberal reinterpretation and critical vision toward tradition. The successors of this concept of steadfast beauty, beginning with David and Ingres, the painters adhered to the Salon adopted this model, though transforming it and eliminating its revolutionary and moral content, and seeking a place from which to be able to project aspects of daily life with a view to bring them closer to their times. The allegorical freedom of Ingres in depicting a nude as in *The Spring*, evolved into *Greeks Encouraging Cocks to Fight*, where Gérôme eliminates any political or philosophical discussion, superseded by the simple pleasures of an apparently simple scene, where two young people attend a cock battle somewhere in Greece. This work embodied an abandonment of one of the fundamental principles in the history of painting as understood by neoclassical painters, since the heroic and moralizing scenes of Greek and Roman antiquity withdraw from the forefront, thus reinforcing the idea of a nonchalant or faraway exoticism.

An Ideal Nude?

Since the Renaissance and through the renovation of the academies, the nude has had a central educational role in drawing. Halfway through the nineteenth century, the nude became the subject par excellence, since it offered the ideal of beauty per se, which did not depart from the Renaissance maxim that the human body was the “measure of all things”. Nonetheless, similar to the other subjects, this genre

underwent an evolution, where the nude when from proclaiming this ideal to a pretext for narrating stories.

Thus, the body, depicted beyond time, becomes a spectacular beauty in works such as the *Birth of Venus* or *Nymph Abducted by a Faun* by Alexandre Cabanel, where the ballet step that the nymph seems to take generates a classic and restrained scene far from the tension that should be inherent therein. The commercial success of nudes of this sort was such that the ensuing generation of artists such as Gervex or Comerre created paintings of increasingly more bereft of the excuses that had previously justified them.

The nude would remain the clearest identity card for artists under the academic banner.

Passion for history, history of passions

Promoted by the State as the main buyer of such large compositions, historical paintings enjoyed enormous success during the nineteenth century. This “great genre” comprised a plethora of sacred, mythological and profane histories such as Thomas Couture's *Romans of the Decadence*, which, as if it were an academic painting manifest, combined all the aspects of this new imaginarium.

However, artists in this case did not restrict themselves to heroic and moralizing scenes, as they rather focused on the most everyday part of life, seeking out different scenarios with which to depict their scenes. In the *French Campaign, 1814*, Ernest Meissonier centers on a retreating Napoleon, though not defeated, thus showing the human side of the emperor. Legends from the medieval and successive times began to become more prominent such as we can view in the *Excommunication of Robert the Pious* by Jean-Paul Laurens or the *Death of Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta* by Alexander Cabanel.

Moreover, Greek and Roman histories afforded the opportunity to escape the monotony of the repertoire backed by the Academy. Thus, in the *Plague in Rome*, Delaunay depicts the punishment threatening a decadent Late Roman Empire, it appears as if the artist had taken an imaginary journey through classic Antiquity, the

medieval age, the Italian renaissance and neoclassicism, in a single stroke of eclecticism characteristic of the painting from this period.

A look into the past is no longer a stable reference for a specific past, otherwise it begins losing its exemplary and moral utility, attributing greater importance to aspects of daily life, referring it to the present and to other more novelesque pasts such as in the Middle Ages.

The Indiscreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie

Portraits were not a particular or specific genre of the academic artists (even impressionists and cubists dedicated works to portraits), but the Salon and the environment of artists in this expression nevertheless favored a type of portrait with certain particulars.

The Bourgeoisie's taste for the lavish and scenographic in large-scale works ran parallel to the desire to possess smaller works or portraits recognizing the social prestige of the owner. While works such as *Portrait of the Marquis and Marchioness of Miramon and their children* by James Tissot, or the delicate *Portrait of Mademoiselle X, Marquise Anforti* by Carolus Duran, may remind us of the Portraits d'apparat of the Old Regime, it is nevertheless worth noting that these works are now intended for a different public, one enjoying more brash compositions with vigorous and sincere strokes reminiscent of Velázquez. These "bourgeois portraits", which proliferated throughout all social classes, include a prime example of modern times, fashion and styles. Portraits are likewise useful for underscoring and identifying the true "heroes of the modern age" among the most influential profiles of Parisian life during the nineteenth century, e.g., those of Marcel Proust or Victor Hugo depicted by Léon Bonnat or Jacques Emile-Blanche respectively.

Reinventing Devotional Painting

The social need for a new imaginarium fostered an approach to spiritual and religious painting. Artists thus began to feel compelled to reinvent a language that had since then seemed to lack meaning. Once again religion became a possible path, where the imagined world came before the need to transmit a doctrine. The academic style thus

directed its gaze toward scenes from the Old Testament, where the past became a broad “catch-all” basket in which the increasingly vague content began losing its profiles. The refining of religious painting and decorations from the Byzantine and neo-Baroque styles gave the compositions a precious and often grandiloquence that tempered emotion and drama. The pain of the mother in the *Virgin of Consolation* by Bouguereau is merely at a second level behind the grandiosity of the scene, which also occurs in the work of Camille Bellanger, as the perfectly drawn and voluptuous body of *Abel*, almost as if it were a sculpture, fails to transmit the extreme violence to which he has withstood.

There are other anecdotal biblical scenes together with these great compositions such as the *Angel of Tobias* by Gustave Doré, away from the inherent solemnity of religious scenes and opening the door to the world of orientalism.

Orientalisms: from the harem to the desert

In their flee from the modern world, the artists, heirs to the exoticism of Delacroix and Ingres, searched other traditions, in addition to religion, for an escape from both the public and themselves. These academic artists frequently visited places such as Egypt, Morocco and Algeria, where they found new references and new traditions, which they extrapolated to the Occidental point of view. Further, writers who addressed this subject such as Victor Hugo, Nerval, Gautier, Fromentin or Flaubert, favored a view toward the middle east that met with increasing success. While such journeys provided these artists with a first-hand study, such as the case of the *Sahara*, by Guillaumet, on other occasions an imagined regard sufficed, which is the case with the *Odalisque* by Benjamin Constant, which affords the viewer an extremely provocative sojourn. This odalisque could be a good example of how the Occident views the Orient from the gaze of "otherness", a view that would persist in our imaginariu during the entire twentieth century, prompting us to dream of far-away and exotic lands, atmospheres and pleasing colors in some cases, and of surprising contrasts in others.

Dreamscapes

Similar to a trip to the Orient, a voyage to Italy was customary for the majority of the artists, and molded the tendency for landscape art in the tradition of Poussin and Claudio de Lorena dating back to the seventeenth century.

Academic landscapes were characterized by the beautiful finish on the details and episodes that, drawn from the mythological and historical repertoire, sprinkled the scene, though as the years progressed, this genre began to acquire more freedom, particularly in the hands of Camille Corot. This artist would base his scenes not solely on the learned rules but rather memories and feelings of nostalgia, which we can view in *Nymph Playing with a Cherub*. Following their star, we can find these nostalgic and romantic evocations in *Diana's Hunt* by Böcklin, which in turn brings us to the symbolism of Osbert in his *Songs of the Night* and even the dark and dreamy Gustave Moreau. Diverse variants of a single genre that becomes increasingly free illustrate how the academic tradition began transforming and opening to new ideals and more modern modes of painting that better met the tastes and styles of the epoch

The Myth: the eternity of humanity at stake

As mentioned above, genres subverted during the nineteenth century and orientalist paintings mixed with landscapes, while religious and mythology provided grounds for representing nudes and fresh exoticism. Artists harnessed the myth to depict scenes that would have otherwise been impossible to accept, i.e., incomprehensible nude bodies, and to thus seek myths that their predecessors had overlooked. Some somber and violent, reminiscent of Michelangelo and baroque styles such as *Perseus* by Joseph Blanc or *Heracles Killing the Birds on the Stymphalian Lake* by Maxence, but also pagan myths such as *Virgil and Dante* by Bouguereau, famous for his *Birth of Venus*. More intimately, other artists delved into the troubling and symbolic mystery of myths such as Gustave Moreau in his *Jason* or Lévy in the *Death of Orpheus*.

In both cases, mythological painting echoes the anguish of an expiring nineteenth century society tormented by its own decadence, to find a vehicle for expressing the violence, melancholy and deep distress.

Decorative Ambition

The period between the sixties and nineties in the nineteenth century featured unbridled economic expansion coupled with profound social changes. During this epoch, past and present were permanently at odds, but there were also meeting points and forums for discussion, particularly in the field of architecture, decorative arts and sculpture. Toward 1876 historical painting competed with major decorations for public buildings, as Paris in particular and France in general was undergoing a significant urban sprawl requiring such works: marketplaces, libraries, schools and public buildings, in addition to private mansions that would be adorned with frescos from artists such as Baudry, Cabanel or Bouguereau. One of the most representative works of this period is undoubtedly the “neobaroque” style of the Opera House, named after its architect, Charles Garnier, whose central roof, today covered with a painting by Chagall, was commissioned to Jules-Eugène Lenepveu, director of the French Academy in Rome between 1873 and 1878. During this period, work had also begun on the Panthéon, which became the Church of St. Genevieve, whose decoration, commissioned to Puvis de Chavannes, is a symbol of the renewal in wall painting and its broad scope far surpassed any previous projects of the sort.

Transfiguration of Academic Lessons

With the advent of photography and motion pictures, the efforts of young artists at the close of the century to create paintings capable of transmitting ideas and dreams; a plausible world in which the viewer could participate in the painting, no longer made any sense. Toward 1914, historical painting, the genre par excellence defended by the Academy, fell to the wayside; though it still persisted marginally.

This exhibition reveals that it was the artists inside the Academy who sabotaged the imposed canons, conventions and industrious illusionism mandated by tradition. Through works such as *Hope* by Puvis de Chavannes or *Woman in the Enclosed Garden* by Maurice Denis, and symbolist works by Seón and Osbert, we can appreciate how the academic painters of the nineteenth century were not only obedient and capable inheritors of the Academy of the eighteenth century, and that the art of this century, while continuing reference to the stylistic patterns of the previous century, notably distinguishes itself from it and exceeds the inherent characteristics of what has always been considered to be academic art. The artists cited above displayed their

work in parallel at official and independent salons and galleries, forming a genuine transformation and alternative reformation to post-impressionism without losing sight of their condition as successors to the great tradition.

Toward a New Perspective

The exhibition closes with two masterpieces, namely *The Oreads* by Bouguereau and *The Bathers* by Renoir, with a view to opening a reflection regarding the historiographical discourse of the traditional development of nineteenth century art. This discourse includes the salient paths of all the artists that led directly to the vanguard styles and left others not pertaining to this conventional narration behind to be "forgotten"; though without them, as we have seen, a large portion of twentieth century art could not be understood.

Both works, despite their evident distance, are useful insofar as they help us view art history from different angles and perspectives. While each one depicts two wholly separate worlds, both come from one of the most important paintings in the nineteenth century, namely Ingres's *The Turkish Bath*, displayed in the Salon in the Fall of 1905. The painting of Bouguereau marked an end to a tradition, a true swan song of a manner to understand art and life as the great tradition of painting had done. The obsessive nude, vague allusions to uncertain and somewhat mythological episodes, precious painting styles, the zest for nuances and perfection in form, altogether with muddled sceneries clearly mark the exhaustion of a tradition. Meanwhile, Renoir, with his voluntary return to academic references, drawings and nudes, likewise indicates the persistent path of this academic tradition in the twentieth century of the vanguard artists. Some patterns that lead us to once again believe that the classic ideal still persists in modern art.

CATALOG

For the exhibition, FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE has published a catalog that further examines some of the various facets addressed in exhibition as written by the general commissioners of the exhibition Guy Cogeval and Pablo Jiménez Burillo, the scientific commissioner Côme Fabre, and Musée d'Orsay curator and renowned specialist in the subject Stéphane Guégan. The catalog contains a copy of all the works presented in

the exhibit, together with a technical file that, as a Catalogue Raisonné, seeks to convert this publication into a volume of reference concerning the subject matter. The publication likewise has a biographical appendix listing the 62 artists from this exhibit and an extensive bibliography.

WEB

With a view to expanding the content of the exhibition and promote access to a wider public, FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE has posted the content of the exhibition on the dedicated webpage:

<http://www.exposicionesmapfrearte.com/elcantodelcisne>