

Seeing Art History: Pietro Antonio Martini's Engravings on the Exhibitions of Paris and London in 1787

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ABSTRACT

Pietro Antonio Martini is the author of two ambitious prints which represent the exhibitions held in 1787 in the Salon of the Louvre and in the Royal Academy of London. The aim of this study is the analysis of the prints in relation to the happening which they represent, for which we will consider their graphic image in the light of which the written sources inform about such important events. The comparison between visual and written documents permit us to reflect on the relationship between images and texts, and as well to pose until which point the Martini prints can be considered a visual equivalent to what happened. On the other hand, the fact of having such a detailed representation of the most important exhibitions held in the same year and in the two capitals of the artistic world at the end of the XVIIIth century, also permits a comparative study of both contexts.

Key words:

Pietro Antonio Martini, Salon of the Louvre of 1787, Exhibition of the Royal Academy of 1787.

RESUMEN

Ver la historia del arte: los grabados de Pietro Antonio Martini sobre las exposiciones de París y Londres de 1787

Pietro Antonio Martini es autor de dos ambiciosos grabados que representan las exposiciones celebradas en 1787 en el Salón del Louvre y en la Royal Academy de Londres. El objetivo de este estudio es el análisis de los grabados en relación con el acontecimiento que representan, para lo cual se considerará su imagen gráfica a la luz de lo que las fuentes escritas nos dicen de tan importantes eventos. La comparación entre los documentos visuales y los escritos permite reflexionar sobre la relación entre imágenes y textos, y asimismo plantear hasta qué punto las estampas de Martini pueden considerarse equivalentes visuales de lo sucedido. Por otro lado, el hecho de disponer de una representación tan detallada de las más importantes exposiciones celebradas en el mismo año y en las dos capitales del mundo artístico de finales del siglo XVIII, permite también realizar un estudio comparativo de ambos contextos.

Palabras clave:

Pietro Antonio Martini, Salon del Louvre de 1787, Exposición de la Royal Academy de 1787.

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1. Francis HASKELL, *History and its Images. Art and Interpretation of the Past*, Yale University Press, 1993, and Peter BURKE, *Eyewitnessing. The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, Reaktion Books, London, 2001.

2. *Eyewitnessing*, p. 185.

3. For «images of current events», *ibid.*, pp. 141-143.

4. Gombrich highlighted in numerous documents the ambiguity of the visual image, which, without additional aids, cannot be as specific as language. See, for example, Ernst H. GOMBRICH, «The Visual Image: Its Place in Communication», in *The Image and the Eye*, Phaidon Press, Oxford, 1982, pp. 137-161.

5. There has been talk of a «visual twist» in history studies. For one state of the question regarding this subject see Joan.Lluís. PALOS, «El testimonio de las imágenes», *Pedralbes*, 20, (2000), pp. 127-142.

6. In the bibliography examined, commentaries on the prints analysed here are often short and always independent. One of the longest, occupying more than one page, refers to the print of the Royal Academy in the catalogue on exhibitions held by this institution between 1780 and 1836 (see note 40), but does not refer to the contemporary print of the Salon of the Louvre. To my knowledge there is no study that analyses the two prints together and in addition to their respective written sources that report their contexts.

In 1993 Francis Haskell published *History and its Images*, which was followed in 2001 by Peter Burke's *Eyewitnessing: The Use of Images as Historical Evidence*.¹ Although differing in approach, both books consider the evocative power of the image in reconstructing the past while warning us of the many dangers involved in interpreting these images as visual evidence of what really took place. Haskell concludes his admirable book by emphasising that the misgivings historians traditionally felt towards such images are mainly justified, given that they cannot be considered in the same way as written documents. For his part, Peter Burke attempts to encourage historians to work with this valuable visual material, while at the same time taking the necessary precautions. One of these is to bear in mind that most works of art were not executed as visual evidence of historical events. «Anyone who wishes to use images as evidence —Burke argues— needs to be constantly aware of the point —obvious enough, yet sometimes forgotten— that most of them were not produced for this purpose».²

Nonetheless, certain works of art were rendered as visual testimonies to real and specific events, albeit a minority. Burke calls them «images of current events», and like other works of art they conform to specific conventions, elements of idealisation, the concentration of the action in a single scene, along with many other aspects that lead to further reduction of the possibility of an accurate visual representation of what happened.³ What's more, we know that an image can never equal a verbal description, since as Gombrich emphasised, compared with language the expressive or communicative capac-

ity of the visual image is more problematic.⁴ Notwithstanding, I believe the two magnificent engravings by Pietro Antonio Martini on the Salon of the Louvre and the Exhibition of the Royal Academy of London from 1787 (figs. 1 and 2) come closest to the point at which works of art may be considered to have achieved their objective by providing faithful visual reproductions of a historical event. The aim of this article is to examine these engravings in the context of the event they depict. It will therefore be necessary to consider accounts written at the time these important events took place. By comparing the visual documents to the written texts we can contemplate how image and text relate to each other. This is a fundamental relationship for art historians, and also for historians in general who increasingly include visual evidence in their works.⁵ Furthermore, having such a detailed visual representation of the most important exhibitions held in two of the world's artistic capitals of the late 18th century, both of which were held in the same year, 1787, provides an invaluable opportunity to carry out such a comparative study. It will be a synchronous comparison between two events that were very different in many ways, although both were unquestionably linked to the conditions and demands of the art world at that time.⁶

There are no studies dedicated solely to Pietro Antonio Martini (1739-1797). Artist dictionaries repeat the same brief biographical notes. Born at Trescali in 1739, Martini worked in Paris, where he collaborated with Jacques-Philippe Le Bas, and in London, and died in Parma in 1797. He engraved plates of historical subject matter, vistas and genre scenes, although the folder bearing his



Figure 1.
Pietro Antonio Martini,
*Exposition au Salon du Louvre
en 1787*, engraving and etching,
390 x 530 mm.
Private Collection, Barcelona



Figure 2.
Pietro Antonio Martini after a
drawing by Johann Heinrich
Ramberg, *The Exhibition of
the Royal Academy, 1787*,
engraving and etching,
375 x 527 mm. Private
Collection, Barcelona.

7. François BASAN, *Dictionnaire des graveurs anciens et modernes*, second tome, Paris, 1789, p. 22.

8. *Explication des peintures, sculptures et gravures, de messieurs de L'Académie Royale*, Paris, 1787, Henceforth also known as the exhibition *livret*, reproduced in the *Collection de Livrets des Anciennes expositions depuis 1673 jusqu'en 1800*, tome VI, Jacques Laget, Paris, 1990.

9. For these and other issues concerning the Salon *livret* see Richard WRIGLEY, *The Origins of Art French Criticism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, pp. 53–58. One study given over to this subject is Ruth LEGRAND, «Livrets des Salons: fonction et évolution (1673–1791)», *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, (April 1995), pp. 237–248.

name in the British Museum's drawings and prints department barely contains a dozen works. The most noteworthy of these, owing to their size, ambition and impact, are the engravings made of the Salons of the Louvre of 1785 and 1787, and on the Exhibitions of the Royal Academy in London of 1787 and 1788. These four engravings, out of the few that anything is known about, are his most famous and considered his masterpieces. Although the name of Pietro Antonio Martini has long since been forgotten, he must have enjoyed a certain reputation during his lifetime, as he appears in the 1789 edition of Basan's dictionary of engravers, which tells us that Martini, artist and amateur *éclairé*, was also the author of works on the history of the Romans, as well as landscapes and seascapes based on paintings by Vernet, and illustrations for M. l'abbé de Saint Non's journey to Italy.⁷

What first impression do we get from examining the engravings of the graphic testimonies of the exhibitions that took place in 1787 at the Royal Academy in London and in the Salon of the Louvre? We see two exhibition rooms filled with paintings, almost from the floor to the ceiling, hung closely together, many of them frame to frame. The paintings on display in the rooms are rendered with the utmost detail, thereby allowing most of the subjects depicted to be identified. Closer scrutiny reveals that many of the paintings have a tiny number drawn into one corner. The two rooms appear to be the same size, and both are shown crowded with people. The visitors comprise women, children and even dogs, and judging by their number these exhibitions must have been a genuine artistic and social event. In both works some people are holding small leaflets, the exhibition catalogue. A number of ideas can be deduced from the images. In 1787 there were public exhibitions, which attracted a great number of visitors from a diverse cross-section of society. Painting dominated these exhibitions and visitors found their way about using catalogues that shed light on the items on display. However, although both images of the exhibitions share many similarities, closer examination reveals various differences. One room has zenithal illumination, whereas the other doesn't. Historical paintings are predominant in the Paris exhibition, while the London exhibition features more portraits. In London, the pictures are hung in a more orderly fashion, mainly at two levels; those on the top row appear to be tilted slightly. Lastly, the Parisian public appear to be more homogeneous than the visitors to the London exhibition, who seem to be a more diverse crowd portrayed in a lighter, more comical and satirical tone. From this comparative analysis of the images, can we infer the real differences that we

could have perceived had we visited both exhibitions? Do Martini's engravings help us reconstruct a reasonably accurate image of this episode in art history, reporting the similarities and differences between the two exhibitions and their diverse contexts? What do the written accounts of these events say?

The Salon of the Louvre, 1787

In the Salon of 1787 some 347 works were exhibited, 231 of them paintings. In the exhibition catalogue⁸ all the works are numbered, and these numbers were indicated above the works. Comparing the 1787 *livret* to Martini's engraving we can see that the numbers in the image correspond to those in the catalogue. Even the relative measurements of the pictures coincide more or less, if we take into account the descriptions of each work, which mainly consist of the title or an explanation of the subject matter, followed by measurements, and occasionally the owner or for whom the work was commissioned, in many cases for the king.

Hence, the *livret* provided significant information about the exhibition. Nonetheless, some critics believed this information to be badly organised and in some parts excessive. The fact that the order of the catalogue's entries observed an academic hierarchy rather than the real arrangement of the works in the exhibition would have been a hindrance for many visitors. Furthermore, certain critics and scholars consider that the subject matter pertaining to the paintings was occasionally excessively detailed —sometimes occupying more than half a page. To not use the catalogue suggested a knowledgeable spectator, thus showing visitors holding catalogues could be interpreted as a sign of their artistic ignorance. Despite everything, no fewer than 21,940 copies of the catalogue were sold in the Salon of 1787 —an impressive amount even by today's standards— and, as we will eventually see, many visitors did rely on the *livret* to guide and inform them.⁹

The catalogue was not the only informative item on sale in the Salon. Pietro Antonio Martini's print on the exhibition was also prized as a sufficiently faithful record of the exhibition. For those who were unable to visit it gave them an idea of what it was like to be there, as well as being an excellent souvenir for those lucky enough to have attended. On September 29 1787 the *Journal de Paris* carried a review of Martini's engraving:

Cette estampe, qui donne une idée très fidelle des Tableaux du Salon, des sujets de chacun

d'eux & de la place qu'ils occupent, nous paroit très intéressante, touchée avec beaucoup d'esprit, & l'on ne peut trop en louer l'Auteur; cette Estampe donnera à ceux qui n'ont pas pu voir le Salon le dédommagement d'avoir été privé de ce plaisir & à ceux qui l'on vu un agréable souvenir. L'exposition de 1785 a été gravée par le même Artiste, mais celle-ci paroît l'emporter de beaucoup, & l'on est étonné que cela ait pu être exécuté en si peu de tems. Nous croyons que cette production sera accueillie du Public ¹⁰.

Martini's print, therefore, was one such «images of current events» that had such an important role in the history of graphic art. Peter Burke points out that «one of the most important consequences of printing images was to make it possible to produce pictures of currents events and to sell them while the memory of those events was still fresh, making these images the pictorial equivalent of the newspaper or news-sheet, an invention of the early seventeenth century».¹¹

The review in the *Journal de Paris* was not the only press coverage of the time. In early October, *L'Année Littéraire* carried similar comments on Martini's engraving:

Cette Estampe représente, avec la plus exacte fidélité, tous les Tableau exposés cette année au Salon du Louvre. Non seulement on y retrouve leus grandeur respective & les numeros correspondans au livret du Salon, sur tous les sujets d'Histoire, mais on y remarque encore avec plaisir, l'esquisse de chaque sujet touchée avec esprit, ce qui donne une idée du génie de l'Artiste & de la composition de chaque Tableau. L'Auteur a pris pour épigraphe *Lauda Conatum*; il peut être assuré que ses souhaits seront accomplis: il n'est point d'Artiste, ni d'amateur qui ne désire la continuation de ce project, & ne regrette que M. Martini ne l'ait pas entrepris plutôt¹².

There was also some criticism. One reviewer was of the opinion that Martini's print was a «work of tireless patience», although the subject matter represented in the pictures was not always easily identifiable, therefore the critic concludes by requesting the public to restrict themselves to «praising the [artist's] efforts» more than the results.¹³ Despite this rather condescending observation, it is interesting to note that it is not only in this text that Martini's engraving is seen as being an exceedingly faithful rendering of the Salon of 1787—in terms of the works on display, their subject matter, sizes and location in the room. It was viewed similarly in the eyes of some of his contemporaries.

As we have already indicated, one item of information that was not included in the *livret* was the location of the paintings in the Salon. This was an issue of prime importance and was very problematic. Martini's engraving is reliable in this aspect, as it represents the works, at least the important ones, in the places where they were actually hung. Indeed, situated in the centre of the room—in the place where in 1785 you would have seen the *Oath of the Horatii* by David—was Regnault's *The Recognition of Orestes and Iphigenia*. One commentator indicates that above it «are another three paintings that have been hung too high», ¹⁴ Alexander and Bucephalus, and, at either side, a Saint Francis of Assisi and a crucifixion scene. In general, therefore, the engraving reproduces the location of the paintings exactly as the visitor to the Salon would have seen them.

Both the commentator of *Année Littéraire* and Martini's engraving indicate that the three previously mentioned paintings were hung too high for the visitor to be able to observe them properly. The same could be said of the large works located directly below these, that is, the ones that occupy the area on either side of *The Recognition of Orestes and Iphigenia*. There are abundant testimonies pointing to the concern over where to hang the paintings so they could be viewed appropriately. Not only were the artists apprehensive about this, but critics and commentators as well. Two aspects that were frowned upon were the excessive height at which they were hung and the room's inadequate lighting. With an admirable logical order and a clear awareness of the how importance it is for works to have an impact at first sight, a reviewer of the Salon of 1787 wrote:

Avant de faire aucune observation sur les tableaux, nous devons en faire une essentielle sur le lien de leur exposition. La plupart ne sont point à leur véritable place, & perdent infiniment de leur prix, soit par l'éloignement, soit par la maniere dont ils sont éclairés. Plusieurs artistes, dans le dernier Salon, se sont ressentis de ces inconvéniens; ils ont, en conséquence, demandé que leus tableaux fussent placés plus bas vers la fin de l'exposition: mais le premier effet est manqué, & le public alors, déjà refroidi sur leurs ouvrages, ne se donne pas la peine de les voir & de les examiner une seconde fois¹⁵.

The same commentator believed the best solution was to hang the works in no more than two or three rows in a longitudinal room illuminated from above. Another writer suggested that, in order to avoid such an accumula-

10. *Journal de Paris*, September 29 1787, p. 1177.

11. *Eyewitnessing*, p.141.

12. *L'Année Littéraire*, October 3-15, pp. 215-216.

13. *Critique de quinze critiques du Salon on notices faites pour donner une idée de ses brochures, in Salons. Critiques, 1787*. The last title is that of a phatic volume, frequently referred to, which contains some of the documents used and mentions the 1787 exhibition. The volume is held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, at its headquarters in Richelieu.

14. *L'Année Littéraire*, September 18 1787, Lettre XIX, p. 314.

15. *Observations critiques sur les Tableaux au Sallon de l'Année 1787*, p. 6, in *Salons. Critiques, 1787*.



Figure 3.
Pietro Antonio Martini, *Exposition au Salon du Louvre en 1787*, detail.

16. *L'Année Littéraire*, September 18, p. 290.

17. See Andrew L. McClellan, «The Politics and Aesthetics of Display: Museums in Paris 1750-1800», *Art History*, 4, (1984), p. 450.

18. «Voyez-le agitant fortement sa lorgnette, il est là comme à l'Opéra...». *Journal de Paris*, 18 de octubre de 1787, p. 1256.

19. *The Origins of French Art Criticism*, pp.271-273.

20. *L'Année Littéraire*, September 18, p. 314.

21. According to the *Salon livret*, David's *Death of Socrates* by David measured 6 ft. long and 4 ft. high; Peyron's was 4 ft. two and a half inches long and 3 ft. high (p. 28 and 33), which corresponds proportionally to that of the print.

22. *Journal de Paris*, October 3, p. 1191.

23. *Journal de Paris*, September 29, p. 1177.

24. For David-Peyron rivalry see Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, Yale University Press, 1985, pp. 241-247, here p. 245. The *Socrates* of both artists are reproduced in this title.

tion of paintings on display, the Salon should be held annually. Some people called for the Salon to have zenithal lighting, in the Italian style.¹⁶ Naturally the artists themselves were more interested in getting their works displayed in the best places. In 1785 David wrote twice to the Marquis of Bièvre and once to the Marquis of Angiviller in order to procure himself a good spot for his *Horatii*, and Lagrenée also wrote to the Marquis to request that one of his works, *The Death of Darius' Spouse*, commissioned by the king, be placed as low as possible. It was generally agreed that the works were hung too high, especially those commissioned by the king. The commentator of *L'Anne Littéraire* recalled how at the end of the exhibition a group of artists of the 1785 Salon asked to have their works hung at a more accessible height, a request that was acquiesced. At the end of the 1785 Salon, D'Angiviller ordered the lowering of all paintings not commissioned by the king so that the King would be able to appreciate them better. It appears that this system was repeated in the 1787 Salon.¹⁷

A careful examination of Martini's engraving also shows us that there would have been difficulty observing the paintings that were hung highest. At the same time it shows us the view the spectator would have had of the paintings that were at eye level. At the back of the room, in the right-hand corner (fig. 3), the woman wearing a hat is looking upward towards the opposite side of the room, and on the same side but closer to the foreground, two men are looking and pointing upward, commenting on one of the paintings that been placed too high. In the middle of the

room another visitor with his back to the spectator is seen using a pair of small binoculars to observe the works of art (fig. 4), one detail that Martini certainly did not invent. A text from the period describes the behaviour of a visitor with his binoculars, similar to opera glasses.¹⁸

Observing paintings close up has clear advantages. It allows the details of the work to be examined in the manner of a connoisseur. To the left of the central wall in the lower section, a visitor holding a catalogue is studying a picture close up, while next to him another spectator is using a *lorgnette* (fig. 5) to appreciate the fine detail of a seascape. However, it should be noted that certain people also made use of this type of eyeglass in order to pass themselves off as experts. Richard Wrigley explains that in addition to the connoisseurs there were the «demi-connoisseurs», people who only appeared to have an expert knowledge.¹⁹ They exhibited sophisticated and pedantic poses, and passed supposedly sophisticated judgement that was in reality without substance. The *lorgnette* was of one of their best props, and the critics often ridiculed these «demi-connoisseurs», although it is difficult to be certain whether the figures in the image are of connoisseurs or pedantic impostors. To the right of the room's entrance, a man leaning against the ledge running along the walls of the room is so close to the painting that he appears as if were about to eat it (fig. 3). This is one of the image's few comical details, which provides a contrast, as will soon become apparent, to the clearly more humoristic and even satirical engraving of the London exhibition of the same year.

The person in charge of hanging the paintings had a particularly difficult task. The *tapisserie* of the Salon of 1787 was the painter Durameau. Not only did he have to cope with the pressure applied by the artists in their attempts to obtain the best places for their paintings, but also with their tardiness in submitting the works. Martini's engraving even reveals this detail. There are two empty frames in the lower half of the central wall. This fact would have been difficult to understand had it not been for the written reports concerning artists' frequent delays and, more specifically, that in the 1787 exhibition some of the works didn't arrive until several days after the Salon was inaugurated. On September 18 the *L'Année Littéraire* mentioned that the announced *The Death of Socrates* by Peyron had not yet been delivered. The author attributes this to the possibility that the picture submitted by David on the same subject had intimidated him.²⁰ Indeed, the intense rivalry between the David and Peyron is no secret, and it appears that David devised a scheme in order

to obtain a commission on the same subject as his competitor, and thereby prove his superiority and outshine his rival once and for all. One can conclude that the place allotted to Peyron is that which Martini left empty below the portrait of the queen, whose rectangular shape is slightly smaller and almost symmetrical to David's *The Death of Socrates*, located slightly further to the left (fig.4).²¹ A document dated October 3 reports that some of the late arrivals, including Peyron's work,²² had recently been hung. The first mention of Martini's engraving I was able to find in the press is from September 29.²³ Therefore, Martini probably began etching his plate with Peyron's work in mind and left a space for it, but finished his print before the picture arrived. It is interesting to note the effort that was made to faithfully reflect the historically correct detail of the delay of Peyron's canvas. Furthermore, written accounts corroborate Peyron's rivalry with David. The engraving does not tell the end of the story, but Thomas Crow relates it thus:

Poor Peyron was all but paralyzed by the time the Salon opened. David's picture was predictably late, but Peyron's was even later, not appearing until the last days of the exhibition. It was no contest. The critical evidence is somewhat slim, because most of the articles and pamphlets had long since been written and printed, but the official *Journal de Paris* as well as the *Mémoires secrets*, both keenly aware of the combat between the two artists, marked Peyron's version as inferior in every particular. After delivering his ill-fated *Socrates*, Peyron would never again be a serious factor in the Paris art world.²⁴

Martini made no engraving of the 1789 Salon. Had there been one, it would have probably shown the aperture opened up in the ceiling for zenithal lighting prepared for that year's exhibition. We will neither dwell on the numerous projects that were carried out there²⁵ nor study the continual complaints and requests from artists and writers, which, as we have seen earlier, also took place in the 1787 Salon. Martini's work depicts an enclosed space above. The same space that many commentators wanted to see opened up, in the same way the Great Room of the Royal Academy in London was open, with its magnificent lantern windows.

Although the analysis of the reviews and commentaries concerning the works on display in the Salon don't form the objective of this study, some of this written evidence supports Martini's meticulous visual testimony. From the image we can accurately deduce that historical



Figure 4.
Pietro Antonio Martini, *Exposition au Salon du Louvre en 1787*, detail

painting was predominant in the exhibition. That this type of painting was the most important genre is indisputable, an aspect the critics also highlighted: «En entrant dans le lieu désigné pour l'exposition mes premiers regards se sont portés sur les tableaux d'histoire».²⁶ Another commentator celebrates the gradual rise in the number of historical paintings, although he complains that most of the scenes were of atrocities, and were lacking in moral lessons and ethical stances to emulate.²⁷ Regarding the appraisal of specific artists and paintings, David's *The Death of Socrates* received the most praise. Regnault's *The Recognition of Orestes and Iphigenia*, a work that was given a prominent position in the Salon, was for the most part appreciated, although not with the same enthusiasm as David's *Oath of the Horatii*, hung in the same place as the Regnault was two years

25. The Carnavalet Museum holds a magnificent drawing from 1789 by the architect Charles de Wailly, which illustrates a project—never executed—to renovate the Salon Carré. The drawing, which proposing the subdivision of the space into two floors, is reproduced in Christian AULANIER, *Le Salon Carré*, Éditions des Musées Nationaux, Paris, 1950, fig. 16. As well as an explaining the history of the renowned room of the Louvre, Aulanier's book includes invaluable graphic documentation of the most important drawings and prints exhibited in the Salon Carré.

26. *Lettre d'un amateur de Paris à un amateur de province, sur le Salon de Peinture de 1787*, p. 7, in *Salons. Critiques*, 1787.

27. *L'Anne Littéraire*, September 18 1787, pp. 301–302.



Figure 5.
Pietro Antonio Martini, *Exposition au Salon du Louvre en 1787*, detail.

28. *Journal de Paris*, September 26 p. 1164.

29. See *L'ombre de Rubens au Sallon on l'école des Peintres. Dialogue critique*, par M.L.N., 1787, in *Salons. Critiques. 1787*.

30. *Promenades d'un observateur au Salon de l'Année 1787*, by M. JOLY and de St. JUST (hand-written in ink), p. 19, in *Salons Critiques. 1787*.

31. *Lanlaire au Salon Académique de Peinture*. Par M.L.B., 1787, p. 9., in *Salons. Critiques. 1787*.

32. *Encore un coup de patte, pour le dernier, ou dialogue sur les Salon de 1787*, by M. LEFREVRE (hand-written), 1787, p. 3, in *Salons. Critiques. 1787*.

33. *Lanlaire au Salon Académique de Peinture*, p. 9

previously. Curiously, at the time Regnault was reproached for certain incongruities in the buildings represented in his painting. This was also commented on by the *Journal de Paris* reviewer who observed that the architecture of the arches in the background of his painting was deemed inappropriate, since the Greeks did not use them.²⁸ Much praise was given to the portraits painted by two women: Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and Adélaïde Labille-Guyard. The pre-eminent placing in the exhibition room of some of these paintings—see Vigée Lebrun's portrait of Queen Marie Antoinette in its central location in Martini's engraving—and the unanimity of the critics regarding its high standard indicates how the work of these female artists was held in high esteem in that period. Vernet's landscapes were equally extolled. One of the more imaginative critical reviews written about the Salon, in which the author has Rubens himself come down from Olympus to see the exhibition, describes how it is Vernet that the great Flemish master is most enthusiastic about, barely giving David's work a second glance.²⁹ The two landscapes featured on either side of the empty frame on the middle of the wall in the background are probably by Vernet. Perhaps it is not by mere coincidence that some of the highest valued works in the Salon—David's Socrates, Vigée-Lebrun's portraits and Vernet's

landscapes—were given the best positions both in the engraving, and in the exhibition.

«La foule me porte au Sallon», writes one visitor. «La foule étoit nombreuse -prosigue-, je passai, sans qu'il fut possible m'arrêter devant les tableaux de M. Vernet».³⁰ «Je m'échappe aujourd'hui de la bagarre, pour entrer dans un tourbillon», another writer comments recalling his first impression on entering the Salon.³¹ A multitude, a whirlwind, is how many commentators describe what they saw and felt on entering the Salon. Comments of this nature were commonplace regarding the French Salons of that time. These observations were repeatedly made about the mix of visitors from all walks of life, their opinions and attitudes. In his renowned study on 17th century painting and Parisian society, Thomas Crow reproduces numerous texts that capture the same perception. These are two referring to the year 1787.

Toutes les fois que le Salon s'ouvre [writes a commentator on the Salon of 1787 salon] on croit assister à une fête populaire, où chaque citoyen va se rendre. Les amis se préparent, on à soutenir la réputation de leurs amis, on à leur en procurer. Les rivaux, chachés dans la foule, épient d'un air inquiet les regards dirigés sur leurs ouvrages; ils étudient les gestes, ils cherchent à deviner les sentiments, & souvent, l'oreille ouverte aux louanges, ils se trouvent forcés d'entendre des critiques utiles à la perfection de leur talent³².



Figure 6.
Pietro Antonio Martini, *Exposition au Salon du Louvre en 1787*, detail.

Everything in the engraving, the diversity of the groups, their movement and gestures, the children, the dogs, the overall festive nature of the event, suggests that it is «une fête populaire». A celebration, nonetheless, with highly diverse participants with different interests and knowledge, which when put together, produced a clash «of opinions of a million individuals». The following is a description of just a few of the characters that mingled:

Le faux connoisseur, le peintre habile & le vulgaire curieux s'y transportent en foule. Le premier le voit d'un oeil avid & trouble; le second l'examine avec un oeil percçant & jaloux; le dernier le parcourt avec une ivresse stupide, & la verité fort du choc *des opinions d'un million d'individus...*³³.

Martini depicted various visitors to the Salon, men and women, with catalogues in hand. Almost in the central area of the foreground, a woman holds a catalogue ostensibly open towards the spectator (fig. 6). A little over to the left, a boy is retrieving a catalogue from the floor. In addition, a group of figures are portrayed in a way that suggests movement. In some cases, people are guided by the official *livret*, although, as we have already mentioned, the idea that one would need the help of the

catalogue to identify the subjects of the paintings is regarded somewhat ambivalently. One text from the time describes a couple visiting the exhibition. The first thing they do is to get the catalogue: «J'achète le livret indicateur.» The text then goes on to describe the visit according to the indications in the catalogue as it is read by the woman, a *bourgeois* who understands little but is extremely enthusiastic and willing to learn. She consults the *livret* to identify the subject of the works, a matter her knowledgeable male companion explains to her:

Voyez, voyez le n° 22 [she replies]: qui'il est joli! Quel est ce Chevalier & cette belle Dame en pleurs? Madame [he points out] c'est Armide & Renaud

Occasionally he asks her to look at the catalogue in order to identify the subject of the canvas:

Eh! Nous avons déjà passé plusiers fois devant le n° 43 sans le voir. Regardez donc votre livret. Qu'est-ce que cela représente? —Ce sont les Fêtes de Bacchus...

The lady, however, is able to identify the characters in some paintings without the aid of the catalogue, a point she makes him aware of:

34. *La Bourgeoise au Sallon*, 1787, p. 7, 10 and 14, in *Salons. Critiques*, 1787..

35. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

36. An observation of W. McALLISTER JOHNSON, «La gravure d'histoire en France au XVIII^e siècle (II)», *Revue de l'art*, 100, (1993), p. 22.

37. *The Exhibition of the Royal Academy*, MDCCLXXXVII. *The Nineteenth*, London, T. Cadell, 1787.

38. *The Word, Fashionable Advertiser*, July 3 1787.

39. In terms of the individuals the only appreciable difference between the drawing and the print is that the latter does not include, on the far right-hand side, the man on his knees observing a painting from very close up.

Tenez, mon Compère, je n'ai besoin du secours de votre livret pour deviner le sujet du n° 16: c'est l'Amiral Coligny³⁴.

Some engravings were also exhibited in the Salon, although they produced less interest. Most commentators made no mention of them. The couple remark upon seeing some *agréables* prints, but go on to say, «We can always see them in the print shop.»³⁵ The Salon of the Louvre of 1787 was a temporary exhibition; the prints could be viewed or purchased at any time. Nonetheless, Martini's print was given a high profile in the press of that time. It only cost four pounds, and to some extent could be regarded as «the visual equivalent of the *livret* of the Salon.»³⁶

The 1787 Exhibition at the Royal Academy

On April 30 1787, the nineteenth Exhibition of the Royal Academy was inaugurated in London. From 1780 onwards, the institution's exhibitions were held in a new building designed by William Chambers, the centrepiece of which was its Great Room, a spacious, zenithally-lit room, the one represented in Martini's print (fig. 2), and which even today is conserved almost intact. Admission to the exhibition was one shilling and the catalogue was free.

Like its Paris Salon equivalent, the London catalogue contained entries for all the works on display.³⁷ In this case, there were 666 pictures. The Great Room held 376, a hundred of which were miniatures. The print admirably reproduces the works exhibited, with their corresponding numbers and location. The following news item from the London press appears to make reference to Martini's print:

The following pretty idea was executed just before the close of the last Exhibition—a *sketch* was made of the exhibition room—the point of sight was that side of the room, which has the miniatures on the right, and the door of entrance on the left—the Prince's portrait, by Sir Joshua—and West's finished sketch under it are in the distance.—Many other pictures are preserved very intelligibly, in the sketch—indeed there is such minute exactness in the drawing, that the discoverable part of Browne's large picture in the anteroom, the scene from the Gamester, with the Popes and Mrs. Wells, is exactly traced:—in the foreground, there are spectators; and of them, there are portraits—as the Prince

of Wales, and Sir Joshua—the Duke of York and Mr. West—Sir W. Chambers, & c³⁸.

These comments, which I have never seen quoted in any other studies, refer with remarkable precision to what we can see in Martini's print: the Great Room rendered from the perspective of the point where the chimney with the miniatures are located on the right, and the entrance door is on the left. The news item describes several of the works hanging in the room—the portrait of the Prince of Wales, for example, painted by Reynolds—and reveals the identity of some of the figures we can see in the foreground, the Prince of Wales, Sir Joshua (with an ear-trumpet for his hearing impairment), the Duke of York, and Messrs West and Chambers. Of note is that the writer first mentions a «sketch», and then later refers to it as a «drawing». Martini's image happens to be based on a drawing by Johann Heinrich Ramberg that represents everyone we can see in the room (fig. 7), a drawing that the Italian artist faithfully transferred to the copper plate.³⁹ The writer of *The Word, Fashionable Advertiser*, may have correctly referred to it as a preparatory drawing, although this explanation does not overcome the stumbling block that Ramberg's only surviving work on the 1787 exhibition is this sketch in which the paintings of the Great Room have not been drawn, and the news report states that the paintings are reproduced *very intelligibly* and with great *exactness*. Perhaps the commentator is referring to a more complete drawing by Ramberg that is now lost. It is equally possible that the author of the text is referring to Ramberg's drawing without having seen it, and is describing it relying on Martini's print, which he was able to see, since the news item was published on July 3, and Martini's print was published on July 1. Whatever the case, it is worth noting that the idiosyncratic portrayal of the public contained in the print—the variety of people and their expressions, the individual portraits, the numerous, satirical details—owes its character to the drawing by Ramberg, an academy artist who had gained a reputation for his satirical pictures. In all probability the artist visited the exhibition and knew its public and distinguished visitors well. Martini carried out the commendable work of transferring Ramberg's image into the Great Room replete with canvases, while safeguarding the unity of the whole.

The print of the Royal Academy shows the room's splendid illumination through a lantern with four semi-circular windows. Chambers probably had the Salon Carré of the Louvre in mind when he made his design, and he improved on the French model by introducing this magnifi-



Figure 7.
Johann Heinrich Ramberg, *Study for the figures of The Exhibition of the Royal Academy, 1787*. Pen, grey and brown ink and wash over pencil, 162 x 510 mm. Copyright The Trustees of The British Museum.

cent zenithal lighting, which, as referred to above, had been a subject of debate for many years, although nothing was done about it until 1789. The information about the architectonic space provided by the two prints reflects, therefore, the greater elegance of the Great Room illuminated from above in contrast with the more planimetric Salon Carré.

The most unusual innovation in the design of the Royal Academy exhibition room was «the line», a kind of moulding or cornice placed about two metres above the floor all around the room.⁴⁰ The level of this line was to mark the height at which the largest paintings had to be placed: they were all hung directly above the moulding. From this point, a structure was built that extended to just below the windows and allowed the paintings at these higher levels to be tilted slightly, which improved their illumination. This line is seen in the etching at the same height as the lintel of the door on the left, and runs the breadth of the three visible walls of the room. There were rules regarding the arrangement of the works. One of these rules was that the line should always be visible, hence paintings could be hung above or below it, but never on top, concealing it. In 1784, there was an episode that clearly illustrates the importance given to this rule: Gainsborough requested that his painting be hung at a specific height without adhering to the line, but the academy turned down his request. In protest, Gainsborough withdrew his 18 paintings from the exhibition, and never again submitted paintings for display.⁴¹ Another, unwritten, rule was that there should be a certain symmetry in the arrangement of the paintings, an aspect that in the print, if we observe the wall in the background, is scrupulously observed.

Compared to the print representing the Paris Salon, it is immediately evident that the works

on display in the Royal Academy are predominately portraits. There was a great demand for portraits in London society at that time. Numerous painters specialised in this genre, perhaps because of the economic benefits due to the high demand—a well-documented fact verified by research.⁴² A number of commentators mention the prevalence of portraits, despite lamenting the absence of some of the most veteran artists of this genre, such as Gainsborough or West. The historical subject matter was left to younger and less established painters; in the 1787 exhibition, the work that received the greatest acclaim was John Opie's *The Murder of Rizzio*, which in Martini's print can be seen in the middle of the wall on the left. The president of the Royal Academy himself, in the centre of the engraving, appears to be drawing the Prince of Wales' attention to this painting by pointing to it. Even though the portrait of the Prince with a servant, painted by Reynolds, occupies the central part of the wall in the background, the work did not arouse much enthusiasm; it was even the object of several critical remarks not entirely lacking in humour, since one commentator's observation that the black servant appears to be taking the prince's measurements to make a pair of trousers could not be interpreted in any other way.⁴³ A number of critics also refer to Louthembourg's landscapes, appropriately placed in a lower central location, although his works, they judged, «shine too much», referring to his simple colours and excessive varnishes that lent this artist's works a popularity that some envied.

What is particularly interesting, returning to Martini's engraving, is the diversity of behaviour and attitude among the wide cross-section of public portrayed in his print, which in many cases sharply deviates from the academy's recommendations regarding how art was to supposed

40. *Art on the Line* was the significant title chosen for the outstanding exhibition held in 2001 at the Courtauld Institute Gallery in London on the exhibitions of the Royal Academy between 1780 and 1836, and was also the title of its corresponding catalogue: *Art on the Line. The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House 1780-1836*, ed. by David H. SOLKIN, The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and The Courtauld Institute Gallery, London, 2001.

41. For the full text on the Gainsborough request and the committee's rejection see Sidney C. HUTCHISON, *The History of the Royal Academy 1768-1968*, Chapman & Hall, London, 1968, p. 67-69.

42. See Marcia POINTON, «Portrait-Painting as a Business Enterprise in London in the 1780s», *Art History*, 2, (1984), pp. 187-205.

43. See, *The Whitehall Evening-Post*, May 5 1787.



Figure 8.
Inscription above the entrance to the Great Room, Somerset House.



Figure 10.
Pietro Antonio Martini after a drawing by Johann Heinrich Ramberg, *The Exhibition of the Royal Academy, 1787*, detail.



Figure 9.
Pietro Antonio Martini after a drawing by Johann Heinrich Ramberg, *The Exhibition of the Royal Academy, 1787*, detail.

to be appreciated. From 1760 numerous publications came out explaining the appropriate behaviour the spectator was expected to adopt when faced with art and, in this case, how paintings had to be contemplated and evaluated. One such publication, which received widespread popularity, was specifically aimed at women, who, as can be seen in the engraving, flocked to the exhibition in great numbers. Published in 1767, *The Polite Arts, dedicated to the Ladies* recommended women not to view paintings too close up, as ignorant people would do, but instead begin from a distance, in order to then approach them gradually, in the manner of the connoisseurs.⁴⁴ Observing a painting was not merely a matter of aesthetic judgement, but also a form of social deportment that had to be regulated. The President of the Royal Academy was concerned about the danger involved in the exhibitions, as the noble style it advocated could be jeopardised if artists devoted themselves to pleasing the dubious taste

of a heterogeneous public. To Reynolds' mind, this degradation of style would occur if paintings of an anecdotal realism ever predominated—these were the ones that pandered to popular taste.⁴⁵ The academics decided to charge an entrance fee to the exhibition, a decision that was not without controversy, «to prevent the Rooms from being filled by improper Persons». ⁴⁶ One shilling was considered enough to exclude the lowest classes. These precautions were replicated in the entrance to the Great Room. Visitors crossing the threshold of the door from the ante-room were greeted with a sign placed above the lintel bearing the inscription in Greek (fig. 8) «οὐδεις ἀποισοῦς εἰσιτω» («Let no Stranger to the Muses Enter», according to the English translation that is currently located above the lintel). In other words, the academy made it quite clear that no-one without the appropriate education should enter the exhibition. It is interesting to point out that Martini regarded this motto as im-

portant enough to have it included in its original Greek at the foot of the print, since the inscription would not usually be visible from the perspective he took to draw the Great Room. What is relevant here is the stark contrast between the anti-populist motto and the diverse public that we can see in the image.

The most striking aspect of the print is that few spectators are actually looking at the paintings, although this is equally true of the print of the Salon of the Louvre. In the Great Room, despite the continual advice concerning the correct method of artistic contemplation, most of the people are looking at each other, and the room has more of an air of an animated society gathering than a space for serious artistic contemplation. Surprisingly, amongst the few people who do appear to be looking at the paintings are some children, on the right (fig. 9), whose attention is focused on the miniature around the chimney. Since their appreciation would not be governed by academic theories, their position here is marginal.

It is also interesting to draw attention to the one portrait subject who appears to be staring directly at the spectator. Seated on a bench on the left and leaning on his walking stick, this mysterious individual, who seems out of context with the others in his pre-romantic poise, may be a self-portrait of Ramberg (fig. 10). To my knowledge, there is no mention of a drawing held in the British Museum representing the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1784 that also features a strikingly similar figure sitting on a bench in the room (fig. 11). The fact that the work is attributed to Ramberg in the British Museum catalogue lends weight to this hypothesis. Ramberg may have borrowed it from an earlier drawing without any other consideration, as a simple visual model, although the inclusion once again of the same figure in a subsequent drawing—which, let us not forget, is looking directly at the spectator—appears to lend greater credence to the self-portrait premise. Nonetheless, if the author of the 1784 exhibition was not Ramberg, but Edward Francis Burney, as David Solkin maintains, this hypothesis is weakened. Even so, the remarkable resemblance between the two, and, moreover, the unusual pose of the personage who seems to stare smugly at the spectator in the drawing and the print depicting the exhibition of 1787, are aspects that don't allow me to rule out the idea that this figure has an identity or at least some special significance.⁴⁷

In spite of everything, the engraving does illustrate some of the traditional ways that experts and connoisseurs appreciated art. We have already seen how Reynolds, in the centre of the image, is pointing out and perhaps explaining to the Prince



Figure 11.
The Royal Academy Exhibition of 1784 (west wall of the Great Room), pen, grey ink and wash, with water-colour, 335 x 492 mm. Copyright The Trustees of The British Museum

of Wales the exhibition's centrepiece. On the left-hand side of the print, a young man holding a walking stick scrutinises a painting through an eye glass (fig. 10), although the fact that he needs a bench to stand on in order to see the picture does betray a satirical touch. On the right-hand side of the foreground, there's a man standing on his own using his *lorgnette* to contemplate a work (fig. 9), and his noble bearing and elegance almost echoes that of the Prince of Wales. It should be remembered here that, as in the case of Paris, there were connoisseurs and «demi-connoisseurs», and, just like in the Salon Carré print, it is equally difficult to discern whether the *lorgnette* can be interpreted here as real knowledge or a form of social exhibition and pedantic imitation. It is difficult to specify in the image without the help of documents or a verbal description.

At the back of the room a couple stand out above the rest of the crowd (fig. 12). This is because they are probably standing on a bench, although in this case to get a better view of the Prince of Wales and his entourage rather than the paintings. The presence of these benches in the London exhibition, although not always used appropriately, was one feature that was envied in Paris. There are no chairs or benches to sit on the Salon Carré print, and written sources corroborate that the French critics perceived this fact as an inconvenience.⁴⁸ Returning to the Great Room, another satirical depiction is located at the far right-hand side of the print. An elderly man wearing spectacles and holding a catalogue appears to be discussing the paintings with a young couple. The lady, however, is paying more

44. See J. BREWER, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 276.

45. For Reynolds and others' warnings see David H. SOLKIN, «This Great Mart of Genius: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780-1836», in *Art on the Line*, pp. 1-8, esp. 5-6.

46. John MURDOCH, «Architecture and Experience: The Visitor and the Spaces of Somerset House, 1780-1796», and *Art on the Line*, p. 20.

47. In the *Art on the Line* catalogue, pp. 25-27, the drawing on the exhibition of 1784, together with two others that show two of the room's walls with their respective paintings, are attributed to Edward Francis Burney. According to Professor David H. Solkin, to whom I am indebted for his explanation regarding his reasons for said attribution, since the comparison of these three drawings with a book of sketches by Burney that is held in the Huntington Library, appears to prove that the previous attribution to Ramberg was incorrect. Nonetheless, Professor Solkin admitted the uncanny likeness between the two individuals.

48. In the Salon of 1789, an infuriated critic could find only one «misérable banc, et quelques chaises, que le beau sexe doit désirer encore plus que moi». It appears, the lack of seating was compared with the «quarré de banquettes» in the Royal Academy exhibitions. Quoted by Richard WRIGLEY, *The Origins of French Art Criticism*, p. 82.



Figure 12.
Pietro Antonio Martini after a drawing by Johann Heinrich Ramberg, *The Exhibition of the Royal Academy, 1787*, detail.

49. K. DIAN KRIZ, «Stare Cases: Engendering the Public's Two Bodies at the Royal Academy of Arts», in *Art on the Line*, p. 58. The text quoted is from 1787, and there is a famous drawing by Rowlandson somewhat later, also transferred to the plate, which portrays one of these comical falls. Drawing and print are reproduced in the in the article cited in figs. 41 and 44. In addition to the falls, some visitors found the long staircase somewhat arduous to climb. A chair was placed on every landing when Queen Charlotte visited the exhibition for her to rest on. For his part, Samuel Johnson humorously observed that following his full recovery from a recent illness, he was fit enough to ascend the Royal Academy staircase if necessary (Sydney C. HUTCHISON, *The History of the Royal Academy*, p.67.).

50. William VAUGHAN, «Taste and the Multitude: The Somerset House Exhibition in Continental Eyes», in *Art on the Line*, p. 243.

attention to the young man standing behind her, who appears to be paying special attention to her décolletage (fig. 9). David Solkin has referred to the «sexualised atmosphere» that was so prevalent in the Royal Academy exhibitions. There were many women in this experiment in democracy, and as we have seen there were even publications concerning appropriate artistic behaviour and appreciation. A number of sexual scandals took place within the context of the exhibitions—one of which involved the son of an aristocratic family—as well as several risqué situations, such as the one concerning the steep staircase that led to the top floor where the Great Room was located. Falls on these stairs were commonplace, and it seems like that views of backsides and other parts of the female anatomy that these falls provided became one of the main lures to visit the exhibition:

Exhibitions are now the rage—and though some may have more merit, yet certainly none has so much attraction as that at Somerset House; for, besides the exhibition of pictures living and inanimate, there is the raree-show of neat ankles up the stair-case—which is not less inviting.⁴⁹

Martini's engraving hints at this atmosphere of flirtation and glamour as noted in the written ac-

counts. Furthermore, it gives us some idea of the political dimension of these exhibitions, and of the way in which they were generally perceived. Regarding the former, the presence in the centre of the figure of the Prince of Wales and Reynolds reflects the sponsorship structure of the Royal Academy exhibitions. Reynolds said in his first speech that a national academy of the arts could neither be funded nor organised without the support of the monarchy. In fact, as we will shortly see, the traditional support of the State for the arts in Paris was viewed from London with envy. Perhaps that is why the engraving of the Salon Carré does not need to make the support of the monarchy explicit, unlike that of the London event. It is significant that the only surviving print of the Royal Academy in the following year, 1788—a print of the same size also executed by Martini from a drawing by Ramberg—depicts a «private view» of the Royal Family in the Great Room (fig.13).

In the 1787 print, the Prince of Wales is holding the exhibition catalogue open in his left hand so that it can be identified by anyone viewing the print. He does this in more or less the same position and manner as the anonymous women visible in the Paris print. In this aspect both images and contexts are similar: the exhibition catalogue is understood as the ideal complement for visitors, for identifying the painters and the subjects represented, especially for those with little specialist knowledge. In the case of the Louvre Salon, we referred to a couple visiting the exhibition in which the woman was guided by the remarks of her companion and the *livret* to the exhibition. In the image of the Great Room, on the left-hand side of the print, a couple almost appear to re-enact the Parisian text: as the woman checks the catalogue, her male companion explains the picture while pointing to it (fig. 10). Also significant is the print's inclusion of children, whose education would of course be very basic. On the left-hand side of the Paris engraving, a child picks up a *livret* from the floor; in the London print, a girl crosses the threshold to the Great Room while attentively reading the official text in order to guide and educate herself (fig. 14).

Paris-London, 1787

The Royal Academy only began to receive press coverage from 1815. Prior to this date, William Vaughan remarks that «comments by foreign travellers on the London art world had tended to be rather casual».⁵⁰ Despite this, I was able to locate a text published in Paris in 1787 that mentions the London exhibition. Although the present study began with the analysis of the exhibition and



Figure 13.
Pietro Antonio Martini after a drawing by Johan Heinrich Ramberg, *Portraits of their Majesty's and the Royal Family Viewing the Exhibition of the Royal Academy*, 1788, engraving and etching, 390 x 527 mm. Private Collection, Barcelona.



Figure 14.
Pietro Antonio Martini after a drawing by Johann Heinrich Ramberg, *The Exhibition of the Royal Academy*, 1787, detail.

engraving of the Salon of the Louvre, work on the Royal Academy Exhibition print actually began earlier in the spring of 1787, whereas the Paris exhibition opened in late August. In a publication dated 1787 in Paris, we find a text entitled *L'ami des Artistes au Sallon. Precedé de quelques observations sur l'état des Arts en Angleterre*.⁵¹ This text is presented as a dialogue between a *chevalier* and an *amateur* who have been to London to see «la fête des Arts». The *chevalier* begins by remarking to his interlocutor that in «Londres, à tous égards est l'émule de Paris», to which the amateur replies confirming the French superiority in the field of fine arts, although he admits English supremacy in other areas:

Londres nous surpasse même dans ses Arts mécaniques & dans quelques Sciences (...) Mais por les beaux Arts, leur patrie est aujourd'hui chez les Francois; & malgré que leur école soit déchue de sa splendeur, elle est maintenant la première du monde (...) J'ai vu le Sallon de Londres, ce que les Artistes m'y ont offert est bien inférieur à ces ouvrages que ici exaltent tant la bile des critiques.⁵²

What this *amateur* least appreciated about the London exhibition was having to pay an admission fee, which gives him an unassailable opportunity to praise yet again his country and

discourse upon the arts and democracy. His opinions are priceless for from the perspective of the social analyst:

Je n'aime point qu'en Angleterre il faille payer d'un scheling chaque visite au Sallon (...) Au moins en France le temple des Arts est ouvert au pauvre comme au riche: confondu avec le grand & l'opulent, il y oublie sa médiocrité; &, dans ces moments d'illusion, des traits heureux qui lui échappent servent l'Artiste attentif à l'observer jusques dans ses mouvements. Les distinctions de rangs & de fortune, déplairaient toujours aux Arts qui veulent être égaux & libres.⁵³

Now by examining a text on the Paris exhibition, this time published in London, we are able to find evidence of similar criticism from the other side of the channel. How were the Paris Salons seen from London? On September 11 1787, *The Word, Fashionable Advertiser* ran a review on the Louvre exhibition that opened on August 15. The commentator begins by pointing out that, although good, the exhibition was «small». He then mentions that there were «only» 231 paintings, an adverb undoubtedly used due to the fact that Royal Academy exhibited more or less twice that number. The reviewer goes on to praise the landscapes by Vernet, and men-

51. The supplement is in *L'Ami des Artistes au Salon*. Par M. l'A.R., Paris, 1787. In *Salons. Critiques*. 1787.

52. Op. cit., p. 2

53. Ibid., p. 6

54. *The World, Fashionable Advertiser*, September 11 1787.

55. Ernst H. GOMBRICH, «What Art Tells Us», in *The Uses of Images*, Phaidon Press, London, 1999, p. 272.

tions Madame Guyard and Madame Vigée Le Brun, recalling that they figure among the four women admitted to the academy, a remark that could be referring to the less favourable situation of women artists in England, since at that time there were only two women members of the Royal Academy. But the most interesting passage praises the French art world for its institutional and State consolidation:

The establishment of this Society is such as to secure it from the inundation of trash, which but too frequently disgraces the Exhibition of the Royal Academy in London. Its founder was the celebrated *Colbert*, who assigned it an apartment in the Louvre.

The Academy is composed of a Director, a Chancellor, four Perpetual Rectors, who serve quarterly, and have two adjuncts; twelve Professors, besides an Anatomical Professor, and one for Perspective and Geometry — eight assistants to the absent Professors— a Treasurer, who receives and distributes the King's provisions- and a perpetual Secretary. Every three months, three prizes are distributed—for Design— In September, there is an annual prize, founded by Count de *Caylus*, for the best expression of the Passions—and, on St. Louis's day, two gold prizes for painting, and two for sculpture. The gainers of the first are sent to Rome, at the King's expense, to complete their studies.

At the *Gobelins*, there is also a School for Painting, under the direction of the Academy.⁵⁴

It seems, therefore, London, in 1787, envied the structure and support from the State that was enjoyed by the arts in France. It was the writer's

opinion that this was one way to prevent the exhibitions becoming inundated with «trash» (riff-raff), with all their bad taste that gave rise to complaints from English critics. Paris in 1787 was, as it saw itself, the capital of the art world. It was likewise in the Salons where this experiment in democracy first took place, an experiment that according to some could not be devalued by charging an entrance fee. The only issue French critics appeared to be envious about regarding the exhibitions of the Royal Academy was the physical space of the Great Room, with benches to sit on and an enormous lantern to provide zenithal lighting.

In his review of Haskell's *History of its Images*, Ernst Gombrich concluded by pointing to an intriguing asymmetry, somewhat unfavourable to the art historian: «Maybe the historian of art cannot tell the historian much that he could not also have gathered from other sources, but surely the historian can still assist the historian of art in interpreting the art of the past in the light of textual evidence».⁵⁵ At the beginning of this article I highlighted a number of aspects that can be deduced from Martini's prints without any need for specific information. Subsequently, with the help of written sources, we have become better acquainted with the exhibitions from Paris and London of 1787, and the texts themselves have enabled us to comprehend many details in the images that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. What can the art historian contribute to the historian? In comparison to written language, images stand out for their powerful capacity to bring things to life. If we interpret them in the light of textual evidence, it may allow us to broaden out capability to reconstruct the past, and, given that visual thinking exists, it may allow us to enhance our understanding.