

# Nationalist Discourses on Art During the Nineteenth Century

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## ABSTRACT

Nineteenth-century criticism cannot be understood without a systematic contextualization of its writings. With nationalism broadly understood as a people's desire to constitute a nation, and hence to be seen as such by foreigners, the approach seems all the more essential given that these same writings sustained themselves by, and emphasized the existence of, firmly-anchored national stereotypes. Yet nationalism was also a conflictual notion in need of a designated enemy to enable the revelation of a unified whole. Through the confrontation of European "national schools" on the peaceful battlefields of international exhibitions, it would also serve as the basis for a partial rewriting of the history of art.



André Belloguet, L'Europe animale : physiologie comique composée et dessinée sur les contours géographiques de l'Europe par A. Belloguet, Brussels, Imp. Vincent, 1882, lithography, 53.5 x 77 cm. Source : [The Special Collections of the University of Amsterdam](#)

If art criticism is clearly a literary exercise, it is just as much a political tool, and thus the validity of artistic judgment must be discussed by taking into account the identity of its author, its political implications

and—especially for international exhibitions—its geographic origins, which in the light of the history of the time, could influence the appreciation of an artist, work or "school."

Too often considered as a simple explanation of a work, an informed guide for the spectator's eye, art criticism is in all cases a subjective exercise, equally reflecting its author's tastes and reflections on the ideal, as well as personal biases stemming from friendships, generational positioning, or political convictions. In this regard, the critic is an author that analyses, proposes, and actually seeks to spread the artistic principles he defends and promotes. To understand this, one simply has to observe how frequently art criticism took the tone of a satirical tract throughout the nineteenth century. It is indeed remarkable that deservedly-admired authors of criticism were those who provided a personal vision of the state of art, and offered artists, institutions (museums, fine arts schools), and governments ideas contributing to what they considered to be progress or defence of values.

The accumulation of discourses on art—whether they come from a government, critic, or art historian—form a whole that is difficult to grasp, one which expresses a nation's collective view of its artistic production, and in the case of international exhibitions, the artistic production of its neighbours. These writings on "schools" are subject to geography and politics, and therefore any definition of this type is a shifting one. It is valid only for a period or a given social context, and emerges only thanks to a doctrine that is common to a group of individuals. Charles Bernard expressed it thus in his "Rapports de la Philosophie avec l'étude des Beaux-Arts" of 1872:

"No matter what he does, the artist is of his time and country; he takes part in their spirit, and can not escape the workings of the dominant philosophy's systems....Every artistic school responds to a philosophical school." (Charles Bernard, *Questions de Philosophie* (Paris: Ch. Delagrave, 1872), 46.)

This doctrine, founded on the notion of "schools," finds its most eloquent expression in discourse on art, and aims especially to exalt patriotic sentiment: it was an artistic and political entity used throughout the nineteenth century according to a principle of confrontation. Discourse on art proved to be nationalist, in the sense that it measured artists as much as it compared the state of various national schools. Thus, through an individual judgment on a country's production, the art critic and historian together form a politics of viewing art.

## **The Art Critic: The Voice of his Nation?**

It is essential to understand how nationality influences the artistic judgment of the critic. For Charles Perrier ("L'art à l'Exposition universelle" in *Artiste*, May 13, 1855), the critic must consider the works presented as a practically always-faithful image of the society to which they belong. In affirming that art is the reflection of its nation, the critic ascribed the Fine Arts section of the Universal Exposition with the task of national identification. In the different critical reviews of universal expositions from the nineteenth century, it is common to see artists likened to their countries, with the chapters of different publications and articles constantly being defined according to the criteria of nationality. This first partition in place, the critic then permitted himself to make observations of varying accuracy regarding the exhibited works. However, in constantly being integrated into their nation, foreign artists seemed unable to exhibit their work and to distinguish themselves individually, thus losing their singularity under the French critic's pen. It was no longer artists, or their work, but rather nations that were confronted. This nationalism, which was exacerbated—not to say reinforced—by the climate of competition in universal expositions, gave rise to critical stereotypes, and revealed the critic's biases more than ever.

According to Charles Baudelaire, nations, which are vast collective beings, are subject to the same laws as individuals. For him the "nation" appeared to be infinitely varied, dependent on the environments, climates, customs, race, religion and temperament of the artist. What can be said of the art critic who, in addition to composing according to the variations unique to each artist, is himself made up of just as many nuances. It is tempting to attempt to define "nationalism," in order to determine whether it is an exacerbation of patriotism or, on the contrary, if it represents a doctrinal, conscious and rigorous shaping of patriotism. Nationalism can thus be

understood as a people's desire to form a nation, subsequently imposing itself as a movement of historical construction. Nationalism can also be considered as a political doctrine demanding that government be based exclusively on its national interest. This simplified opposition, which would only give two definitions to the term "nationalism," can be seen in the way in which nineteenth-century French criticism received foreign art.

French criticism witnessed, as well as contributed to, permanent changes in its artistic identity, by basing itself on the artistic history of its country. A French work presented at the official national exhibitions was firstly judged in comparison to the other works that the artist had already shown, as well as to those of his contemporaries of the same nationality. The inauguration of universal expositions supplemented this first approach by making it possible to define the art of one country in opposition to that of another. A mirroring principle was instated, since it was in comparing oneself to the art of other nations that an idea of a national school was built. From that point forward, nationalist reactions manifested themselves within a country as much as they did abroad. The notion of nationalism is therefore by essence a notion in need of conflict; it seems to require an adversary in order to define itself and to exist, whether that "enemy" be within the nation or without. This rival can take on the most diverse forms, and certainly helps explain the malleability of the term "nationalism," which during the course of the nineteenth century showed itself to be both modern and "antimodern," intellectual and popular, in addition to belonging to various political parties.

The conflict did not exist only in relation to others. Certain critics did not hesitate to depreciate their country's art, without all the same denying their citizenship, hence asserting that their belonging was not a criterion of objective truth. Maxime Du Camp said:

"We are so accustomed in France to seeing the works of our best painters as more or less faithful imitations of older paintings....[English painting] showed us a clearly formulated originality, and that was indeed something that surprised us for a long time." (M. Du Camp, *Les beaux-arts à l'Exposition universelle de 1855, peinture, sculpture, France - Angleterre - Belgique - Danemarck - Suède et Norwège - Hollande - Allemagne - Italie*, Paris, Librairie Nouvelle, 1855, p. 298.

The identity of others was no longer in principle a threat to one's own identity. The critic defended his identity, because such a defence was a general principle. In other words, if he could defend his country's art, it was because he permitted himself to accept the artistic production of others. These critics who chose—in all or at least part of their commentary—not to characterize artists according to their country, tended to restore the individuality of works and their creators. Nevertheless, the majority of these "personalized" commentaries took up the geographic typology of universal expositions right from their very titles for the appearance of articles, even though their remarks excluded any national categorization or school system. The very politics of the Universal Exposition hence seem to be called into question.

In his study on the fine arts at the 1878 Universal Exposition, the Italian Tullo Massarani, who was the president of the international jury, suggested a positivist study of the "national" question:

"In order to resist absorption—and I am still speaking solely of art—it is necessary to cling to all that makes up the local character, to be content with what we have; there are not many who have enough abnegation or courage, enough modesty or audacity to arrive at this point." (T. Massarani, *L'Art à Paris*, t. 2, Paris, Renouard, [1879] 1880, p. 138-139.)

The national question was developing here from a purely cultural, literary or folkloric point of view. The question of politics—one that was military, and thus linked to states—was no more than a shadow, an imprint outlining the classification. In taking care to specify that he was speaking solely of art, Massarani reveals the ambiguity that his remarks were likely to incite in his readers, suggesting that geopolitics were at the centre of artistic discourse.

## Geopolitics of Exhibitions

The role of exhibitions, and especially of universal expositions, was to serve as a battleground, one in which the public witnessed artistic rivalries that reflected a broader context of conflict. International exhibitions were clearly a place for cultural confrontation, in a way replacing the military terrain. In Paris, the entrance to the 1855 Palace of Industry incidentally took the architectural form of the Arc de Triomphe, an urban symbol usually used to celebrate military victories. Here the battlefield was inverted: instead of weapons being placed at the base of the arc, the structure instead opened onto an arena where countries would encounter one another around the question of progress. The Palace of Industry was the arc of the Second Empire, bearing a new and eminently contemporary way of thinking: to conquer the world, the artistic or industrial spirit should be stimulated rather than the military one. A supposedly peaceful battlefield was established, in which the different fronts opposed one another for a medal. This metaphor was very frequent in literature, art criticism in a way becoming the indicator or relay for this confrontation of civilizations. Its most charming expression is without a doubt that of Anaïs Ségalas, who imagined the methods of combat:

"These brothers will nonetheless fight one another, a fight that will be entirely peaceful: medals and not provinces will be in dispute. Without shedding a drop of blood, peoples will fight on the field of battle, one armed with Sèvres porcelain, the other with Lahore cashmere; this one with Algerian burnous, the other with calabashes artistically worked by negroes. Through this proximity, we will know the progress and degree of industry in all parts of the world: our Universal Exposition will be like the thermometer of civilization." (A. Ségalas, *Contes du nouveau Palais de cristal*, Paris, Louis Janet, 1855, p. 15).

The place of each national school at the first universal expositions, and the degree of caricature or political manipulation present in these representations, has been the subject of recent studies, beginning with Patricia Mainardi's pioneering treatment (1987). The very organization of the exhibition, along with the geography of its space, were analysed to determine the artistic politics of the time, however studies of the historiography and criticism arising from these confrontations are much more rare. Even so, the discourse on art emerging from these demonstrations testifies to the spirit of the time, and makes it especially possible to reveal the role of artists in the construction of a nation's identity. The written text sometimes had the same value as the official reward, as the critic's compliment or reproach was a decisive weapon in the perception of a work by the public or the market. In this French view of European art, the role of politics consequently appears to constitute a subject in itself.

The universal exposition created a new map of the world, and especially of Europe. It invented an artistic demography, the number of works displayed by each country not being proportional to their populations. The host country's domination can be seen in the distribution of spaces granted to invitees. The organizing nation redrew the spaces, and developed an artificial map in which confrontations and comparisons presented a political discourse within the enclosed space. Walls became borders, galleries marked off areas: during the Universal Exposition of 1855, Peru and its neighbour Rome shared a view of Denmark. This temporary map redrew the world's borders for the duration of an exhibition.

The geopolitics of the universal exposition are discernible in the articles that were themselves separated by nation and country, and by the critic or newspaper that sometimes confused the two out of ignorance or narrow judgment. The space granted by the organization to invited countries would undergo a new transformation once a critic had come to grips with the space. It could be increased or decreased according to the interest a critic had in its subject, or in the perceived value of a school or the works displayed. The organizing geography gave way to the weight of the value judgment of the critic and his newspaper. In a given space specific to each periodical, the author in his turn distributed the territories, granting predominance as he pleased to certain artistic schools over others. He took part in the hierarchization of European countries by redrawing a completely partial artistic Europe, whose methods call for exploration.

In 1874, in his *Grand Dictionnaire universel*, Pierre Larousse defined "nationalism" as a: "Blind and exclusive preference for all that is specific to the nation to which one belongs" (P. Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Administration du grand Dictionnaire universel, tome 11, 1874, p. 855). In art criticism, this blind preference can be synonymous with patriotism. In such a case, this can translate either into bad faith, leading the critic to always prefer his country's art by denigrating the production of its neighbours, or into ignorance or disinterest. It is indeed easier to address and judge the artistic production corresponding to one's own culture, since in this case the critic is supposed to perfectly master the artistic, historical, cultural and sociological context of the work. It is much more difficult to address the art of other countries, since in many cases ignorance or incomprehension of the customs, cultures, traditions, religion or politics of neighbouring countries led to distorted judgments based solely on the French cultural context. Speaking of the art of another country is certainly difficult, yet one's enemies must be invited in order to celebrate one's victory. In these artistic Olympics, criticism was consequently a comparative exercise refereed by a partial judge.

## **Nationalist Writing of Art History**

With his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, Giorgio Vasari offered, as early as 1550, a genuine program of artistic politics. A painter himself, Vasari in fact opted to dedicate the first edition, as well as the second in 1568, to Grand Duke Cosimo I de' Medici, while the Florentine Academy opened its doors in 1541, and the Academy of the Arts of Drawing in 1563. It was thus good form to, on the one hand, address the protector of the arts, and on the other to assert Florentine primacy through its most important artistic figures. These *Lives* had to create a history of art, garner the admiration of contemporary artists by establishing models among their predecessors, and guarantee the superiority of Florentines in matters of art, for obvious political questions.

This political dimension of the *Lives* was broadly used in France during the nineteenth century. In the foreword to the 1803 French edition, the publisher pointed out that Vasari's writings should be required reading for everyone practicing in the arts, in order to cure them of the supposedly bad French taste caused by the popularity of the Northern School (Vasari, *Vies des peintres, sculpteurs et architectes les plus célèbres*, Paris, éd. Boiste, an XI (1803), p. 7). More than an introduction, this foreword was a plea for the renewal of models, and like Vasari in his time, the publisher sought the return of the contemporary French School in order to "give" it a major place in the European artistic landscape.

If this reworking of the Vasarian plan here is literal, it appears more subtly in the art historical writing of nineteenth-century France. Universal expositions gave birth to a considerable group of critical texts that reviewed the state of national schools, and also gave rise to the publication of new *Lives*, which used biography to outline the history of these very schools. Among these we should cite the undertaking initiated by Théophile Silvestre in 1852 entitled *l'Histoire des artistes vivants français et étrangers*; that of Charles Blanc *L'Histoire des peintres de toutes les écoles depuis la Renaissance jusqu'à nos jours*, which was published between 1849-1876; *L'Art et les Artistes modernes en France et en Angleterre* by Ernest Chesneau (1864); *Les Études sur les Beaux-arts en France* by Charles Clément published in 1865; to which should necessarily be added, as expressed by Chesneau, the numerous biographical publications in specialized reviews, as well as the bulletins from academies in the provinces:

"It is by no means will that is lacking for the few obstinate researchers, whose primary preoccupation is reconstituting our school's past. In this respect, we cannot praise enough the local publications of the academies of the provinces." (E. Chesneau, *L'Art et les artistes modernes en France et en Angleterre*, Paris, Didier et Cie, 1864, p. 24).

If these texts have a common aim, it is that of outlining the natural lineage between old masters and contemporary artists. If the "artistic school" was a shifting notion, its first art historians outlined their transformations by

depicting major artistic figures, with contemporary artists serving as their sons, behind whom artists in training must situate themselves to honour their nation. Thus in writing the history of schools, they sought a "spirit of national art," a people's aspiration for a specific artistic form: its genius. This conception of national art found its most singular extension in Hippolyte Taine's *The Philosophy of Art* (New York: Holt & Williams, 1865 [1873], trans. John Durand), which made of art history a science that was endowed with its own system of evolution, and that was formed by artistic schools stemming from the natural physiology of its constituent peoples.

While art criticism wrote the art history of the nineteenth century in the present, through its immediate inclusion of contemporary changes, it also permitted itself to rewrite the art of the past. By reporting on the spot about this new artistic Europe portrayed by universal expositions, and by integrating the geopolitics of the European artistic scene, art criticism left behind its role as journalist to take on that of the historian. In this young discipline that is art history, to take the words of Michela Passini, "nationalism was a central and structuring factor, and not a superficial layer of language," one that is important to take into account today in order to contemplate the history of art history (Passini, *La Fabrique de l'art national*, 2012, p. 3).

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