Foreword

Lois Fink's book sets out a unique double methodological framework: On the one hand, it seeks to spell out the concrete conditions of official French art institutions — specifically the Salon and academic complexes — in the nineteenth century, and, on the other, it seeks to connect these institutions with the modern development of American art. This broad and inclusive idea required not only a thorough investigation of both French and American painting of the period but also a grasp of the complicated channels of dialogue between them. The result is one of those rare experiences in scholarly life today: the projection on a grand canvas of the densely layered nineteenth-century landscape with a rich and vibrant texture that enables both Americans and the French to enlarge their understanding of the critical aesthetic interplay that gave new resonance and depth to Yankee culture.

There are many other things to be said in praise of this seminal contribution, not least of which is its heuristic aim and the way that, with its extensive research and knowledge of two pictorial traditions, it can be used as a virtual guide to either French or American art of the nineteenth century. And here I am thinking not of the conventional surveylike text but of the more recent forays into material culture and social history. Fink takes us backstage to see all the elaborate machinery of the institutional complex, with its pedagogy, bureaucratic mechanisms, endless regulations and lists of awards, selection and jury procedures, meetings and associations, and changing perspectives. Her work can stand on its own genuine merits as cultural history and analysis.

The Americans and French have been carrying on with each other since the early French explorers took an acquisitive interest in the heartland of America in the seventeenth century. The rebels of 1776 found independence exhilarating when they discovered the ultimate weapon in their arsenal: recognition and assistance from France. From the outset the Americans had anticipated help from England's traditional enemy, and secret exchanges took place as early as 1775. Although the course of "true love" did not continue to run smooth between the two countries, the Franco-American alliance revived in
the next century whenever one or the other (or a faction thereof) needed diplomatic aid in the face of external threat or domestic crisis. The significance of this relationship during the time of Napoleon is seen in the way the North American painter John Vanderlyn could exploit it with his anti-British Death of Jane McCrea to gain entrance to the Salon of 1804. Indeed, Napoleon expressed willingness to win over the Americans who had settled in England; in 1802 Benjamin West was feted by the Parisian art community, and the following year Napoleon signed the decree that made that painter a foreign associate of the Academy — then known by its more democratic title of Class of Fine Arts in the National Institute of France.

Three-quarters of a century later, North Americans comprised the largest national body of foreign artists at the Salons, with female exhibitors constituting a surprising one-fourth of that number. Almost all of them had been French-trained and followed the direction of their French masters. Some had permanently settled abroad; most had a solid clientele back home who looked to Paris for their cultural lead. This new clientele no longer thought it necessary to buy paintings that articulated the national experience but perceived themselves in the vanguard of international culture. They encouraged gifted young painters to go abroad for their “sketching” and “finishing” school.

Fink shows how critical for North Americans was their participation in the Salon, which exercised considerable authority in Western art at the time and valorized those artists who gained admission. This acceptance not only meant social legitimization according to bourgeois standards of judgment but also enhanced the commercial potential of the artists’ work. Elizabeth Gardner admitted in 1868, “It gives me at once a position among foreign artists and raises the value of what I paint” — and as a shrewd Yankee, she continued to give the Salon jurors what they wanted.

Submitting work to the Salon meant entering the arena ready for gladiatorial combat and fighting it out in terms of the atelier rivalries, political alignments, and personal jealousies. Acceptance was a rite of passage for the young middle-class painter, male or female; and conversely, rejection carried the devastating implications of professional and personal incompetence. Paris became the testing ground for the ardent neophyte and would-be professional, the place where you “made it” or returned home to enter the family business or raise a family. (Of course, if you were wealthy enough you could extend the “trial” period indefinitely and enjoy life as a dilettante.)

By the time of the Second Empire, the Salon began to function as a state-subsidized “high art” bazaar. Agents, dealers, and collectors met there to arrange sales with or without the painters, and critics had a field day likening its operations to that of the Bourse. The painters themselves contributed to the marketplace strategies by
relativizing the official showcase through the establishment of alternative spaces of their own. The rise of the Salon des Refusés and the independent exhibition or counterexhibition considerably amplified the stock-market image, and at the same time allowed publicity hounds like Manet and Whistler to reap the rewards of notoriety. The Third Republic extended the concept by increasing the total number of works accepted. The Salon of 1880 displayed seven thousand works, making it impossible for it to be anything other than a colossal indoor flea market. Still, it continued to certify the “value” that dealers and collectors required. The growth of the major Yankee collections of such robber-baron types as William Vanderbilt, A. T. Stewart, John Taylor Johnston, August Belmont, and William T. Blodgett attested to their recognition of the high status that buying French and Franco-American conferred on their cultural position, as well as to their businesslike perception of the investment value of the works. Furthermore, because they were pacesetters, the mere fact of their ownership of a particular artifact helped it to appreciate in value. It was undoubtedly this combination of status and investment value associated with contemporary French art that predisposed the American collectors to acquiesce in the U.S. government’s 33 percent duty levied on foreign works of art from 1883. This protective tariff, as Fink shows, constituted a financial threat to French artists who were patronized by the American collectors and who invariably were the teachers of American art students. While all the Americans trained and residing abroad attacked this policy (after all, they received instruction free at the state-controlled art schools in which those same masters taught), the collectors in this period seemed to have been passive on this issue. The duty, in fact, made their collections even more exclusive and, in their eyes, ultimately more valuable. (It also opened the market considerably to the street-smart forgers and their agents who received a kind of “authentication” by merely paying the duty.)

After the debilitating impact of the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune, France opened itself momentarily to foreign cultural influences and demonstrated a willingness to forgo the chauvinism that had marked its entrance into the war. Analogously, Americans in the aftermath of their Civil War expressed an eagerness for the cosmopolitan culture offered by France and traveled there in droves. Their heavy investment in French luxuries and their ability to acquire the trappings of high culture eventually led to a cultural backlash on the part of the French, who expressed a sense of menace at the Yankee settlers’ “colonializing” the home territory. The French critic Charles Bigot charged in 1883 that the Americans, having mastered their lessons so well, now hoped to “vanquish the supremacy of the French school.” One year later, the cheeky John Singer Sargent and his model Madame Gautreau, an American socialite residing abroad, together produced a scandalous portrait that brought out
a rash of anti-Americanism and xenophobia. American painters especially took center stage in the 1880s. Between 1878 and 1900 the French government acknowledged American “know-how” about French standards and purchased thirty works by American masters. At the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris, this national group constituted the largest of all foreign exhibitors and received the largest number of awards among the non-French artists. Except for the inevitable Munich-trained William Merritt Chase, who painted as if he had been taught in the studio of Carolus-Duran, the majority of the award winners were regular Salon participants. The same representative sampling of artists at the 1889 World’s Fair would reappear at the World’s Columbian Exposition four years later.

What gave the Salon its clout was the heavy investment of the French state in the beaux-arts, placing its prestige on the line with its Ecole des Beaux-Arts, its Academy, the branch of the Academy at Rome, and the Salon. Foreign artists enjoyed legitimate status in France and never ceased to compare their situation abroad with their problematic social role at home. The Francophilia of most Americans was in part stimulated by the disillusioning return to the farm after seeing Paris, but this also had a positive quality insofar as the artists had a standard by which to gauge indigenous art institutions and could work to organize new institutions or ameliorate existing ones.

By the last quarter of the century, this attitude turned inward in the form of reverse snobism: Feeling infinitely superior to the crowd, and backed by a powerful clientele, these American artists identified with their elite backers and thumbed their noses at the masses of Americans who failed to understand them. They founded the Society of American Artists and went into competition with the home-grown exhibitions of the National Academy of Design. They were all for divesting their art and lives of the taint of provincial American culture, and rationalized the rejection of republican ideals with appeals to higher levels of quality that would eventually raise the level of general taste. American artists and art-history scholars have been saddled with this burden ever since, forced to assume a defensive position about the inherent character of indigenous cultural production. There is something of high tragedy in Julian Alden Weir’s confession shortly before his death: “I have never painted a great picture...I have never painted a masterpiece as I had hoped to, that would live after me, and I am dying a disappointed man.”

Not fortuitously, the initiation of this elite discourse coincided with the emergence of scientific racism and the need to justify Western and Caucasian culture as the culmination of the evolution of the species and natural selection. This becomes clear in the reviews of the great universal expositions of 1889 (Paris), 1893 (Chicago), 1900 (Paris), and 1904 (St. Louis). Weir’s lament thus comes as a reflection not only on his aesthetic contribution but also on his failure
to live up to the standards of his profession and, indeed, of Western civilization.

The academies and art schools inadvertently inculcated this "masterpiece syndrome" by constantly parading the examples of classical antiquity and the Renaissance before the students as models of excellence and "high art." Unaware of the changing, historical nature of this practice and the ideological underpinnings of taste, the vulnerable neophyte internalized as evidence of a personal lack his or her incapacity to produce a "classical" work. The French Academy itself never claimed to be able to produce "genius" or quality – these were not subject to pedagogical control – but claimed responsibility only for the transmission of the rules of design and technique by means of which "great" art could be produced. In this sense, the Academicians were far more materialist in their approach than they were willing to admit, but they kept preaching the "ideal" of the past through the material examples of antiquity and the Renaissance until the art student internalized these standards as natural and inevitable. Thus the average art student was intimidated and even "terrorized" by this confrontation throughout his or her lifetime. Even when cultural practice shifted to emphasis on the personal and spontaneous, the standard of "quality" associated with the ideal continued to inhabit the forefront of the artist's preoccupations. But this outcome derived from a long evolution of modern society in which the practice of art, once a fundamental and urgent experience, became the handmaiden of political and social hegemony in expressing "higher" levels of experience.

The practitioners of art history, especially those concentrating on American art, assimilated this notion of quality and until only recently remained defensive vis-à-vis the so-called masterpieces of the past and those specialized branches dealing with this material. They observed that art historians who distinguished themselves in the field invariably attached themselves to the "masterpieces," while it would seem that scholars investigating other aspects of cultural experiences – folk art, popular art, comic strips, academic art, and American art – were doomed to hopeless mediocrity by virtue of the subjects of their study. For this reason it took scholars in the social sciences, who did not have to approach the material with this excess intellectual baggage, to nudge the art historians along by virtue of the different kinds of questions they asked of the material. They pointed out just how fascinating images and systems of signs were for study, regardless of their temporal and spatial point of origin. Quality and magisterial values counted for less than the points of intersection of the visual signs with a cultural matrix.

Fink's book rejects the traditional stylistic and biographical approach and goes essentially to the heart of the institutional complex with its emphasis on specific works. In the course of her research,
Fink, like her mentor Joshua Taylor, grew less concerned with “movements” and their heroes (for modern masters and their “pieces” read “avant-garde”) and more preoccupied with the physical artifacts themselves and their participation in the flow of history. She addresses questions of why, how, and when certain types of work appeared at the Salon and the ways in which this kind of information affected the production of Americans who had no equivalent kind of legitimating threshold back home. It required her to comb patiently and painstakingly the Salon catalogues – not much different from systematically perusing phone books – for national groups of painters and their choices of subjects during the entire nineteenth century. This method yielded some surprising revelations on the numbers of Americans – a large proportion of them women – showing in the Salons and on their relations to the French atelier system. At the same time, this systematic run-through stimulated Fink to formulate the thematic organization of her work on the basis of the statistical breakdown of her findings. Throughout her study, Fink is able to give percentages of Salon representation and of distribution and frequency of awards that illuminate the ideological framework of the Salon institution.

Fink is well aware of the curious omission in American painting represented in the Salons of working-class or urban themes beyond the realm of the tea party, ball, and outdoor excursion. In a sense, two overlapping motives seem to have warranted the rejection of images of the class struggle, especially from the 1870s on – the urge to compete in the Salons on international terms and the pressure on the artists to persuade their French masters that Americans were capable of creating modern figure paintings equal to those of the Old Masters. The idea of the “American Renaissance” of the late nineteenth century that gave the native participants in the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893 their heady sense of “triumph” derived from their previous Salon exposure. As late as 1898, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, who had a major showing at the Salon of the Champ-de-Mars, asserted self-confidently that at last he could call himself a “success.”

Although this group would never have dreamed of “stealing” the idea of modern art from their French masters, they certainly thought of themselves as on a par with them. Their stated intention of producing for an “international” rather than a provincial or national audience indicated their acquiescence in the hegemony of those same late-nineteenth-century elites who sponsored the world’s fairs. These groups, increasingly exploiting fine artists to construct their symbolic sign systems and give the fairs a characteristic look, projected cosmic vehicles of empire with themselves in the driver’s seats. They encouraged and supported the pretensions of North Americans trained in Paris who, like Sargent, knew how to give their substructure of “timeless” design a surface dose of “timeliness” to modernize them.
in tune with the grandiose industrial and consumerist ideals visible at the fairs. The influence of Darwinian theories on the imperialist designs of the international expositions is also reflected in the many depictions of primitive peoples, Native Americans, and Near Eastern scenes that inundated not only the Salons of this period but the chain of world's fairs as well. These visualizations of bygone eras popularized recent anthropological findings that endowed popular racial attitudes with apparent scientific validity, thus helping to rationalize foreign and domestic policies that involved nonwhite populations.

Fink's book fulfills what I see as the overriding quest of present-day social art history, the attempt to adumbrate the essential connecting links between what can loosely be referred to as the aesthetic artifact and its historical and social matrix. Her work addresses the mediations of history, politics, social change, and economics, and culminates in the "still, small voice" of modernist insight. Although she may have been unconscious of the fact at the outset of her research, Fink has brought us to the point where both the French and Americans can understand how the French institutions — even with their built-in psychological incitement to rivalry and emulation — profoundly shaped American modern art and hence the very roots of Fink's own historical construction.

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