The Era of French Academic Painting

Excerpt from

The Da Vinci Legacy

By

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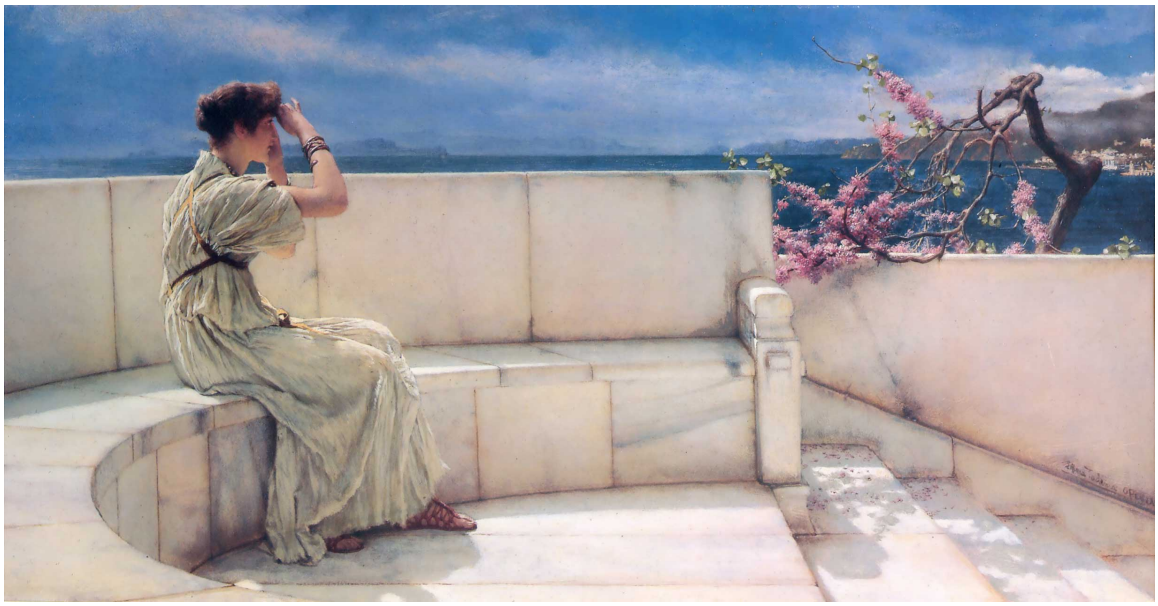
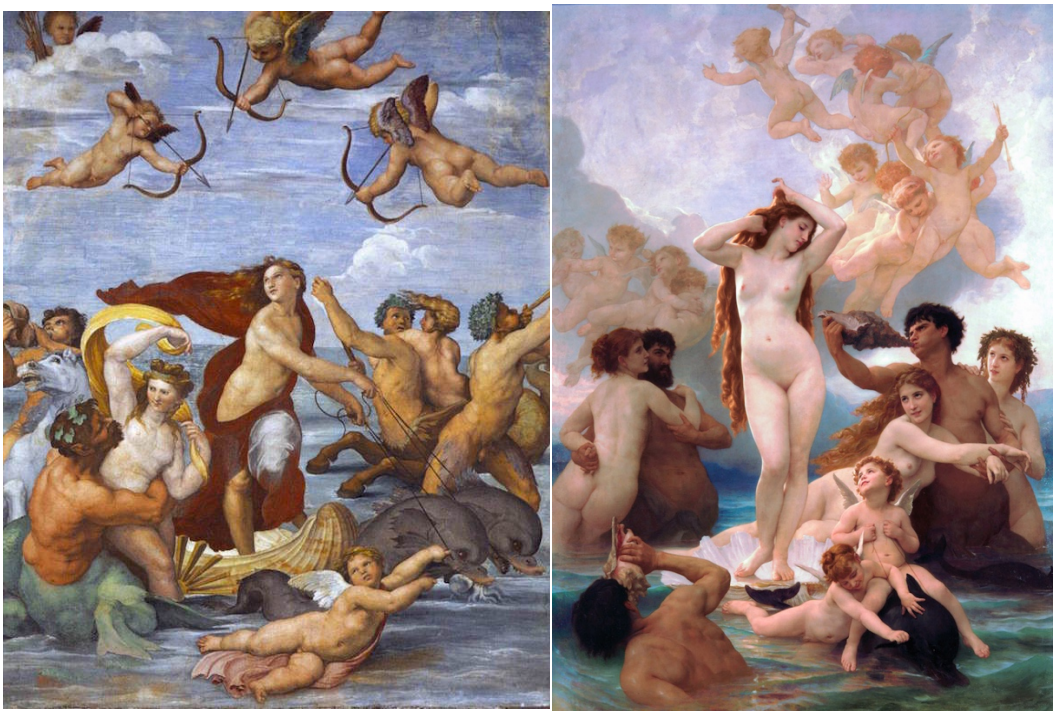
As the 19th century progressed, several developments conspired to increase interest in the art of the Renaissance, and particularly the work of Leonardo da Vinci, as never before. This was especially true for the art schools in France, Britain and elsewhere in Europe. Since the Napoleonic Era, most nations in Europe had established their own academies where budding talent could be nurtured and educated, so as to produce the masters of the future. In France, this led to the formation of the École des Beaux-Arts; in Italy, the Accademia di Belle Arti, and in England the Royal College of Art, in addition to the Royal Academy of Arts, which was established as early as 1768.[i]

The style of art taught in these schools advocated a return to the primacy of drawing, color, and perspective established by Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo and other leading Renaissance artists, enhanced with new techniques of optical realism made possible by the invention of photography. In France, artists found another major impetus during the restoration of the Napoleonic Empire by Napoleon III, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte.[ii]



Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *Expections,*1885. Idealized imagery from classical Antiquity offered an escape from the drudgery of late 19th century urbanization during the Industrial Revolution.

The result was a style of breathtaking technical ability and almost photographic realism that became known as 19th century academic painting. At the same time, these academic institutions tried to move their students away from themes that had gained much currency in the 19th century in favor of uplifting scenes that celebrated great moments in the nation's history. Throughout much of the 18th century, artists had maintained a strong tradition in the depiction of landscapes and genre scenes, which accurately documented the social conditions of their society. Academic art, by contrast, resolutely turned away from contemporary subjects towards historical or fictional themes. Another favored motif was the world of Greek mythology, in part because it gave artists license to depict female nudes. These works in particular were much sought after by the *nouveaux riches*, the wealthy barons who had made their fortune in the Industrial Revolution, and had now replaced the aristocratic class as the primary patrons of contemporary art.



Raphael, *The Triumph of Galatea*, 1514 (left) and William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *The Birth of Venus,* 1879 (right)

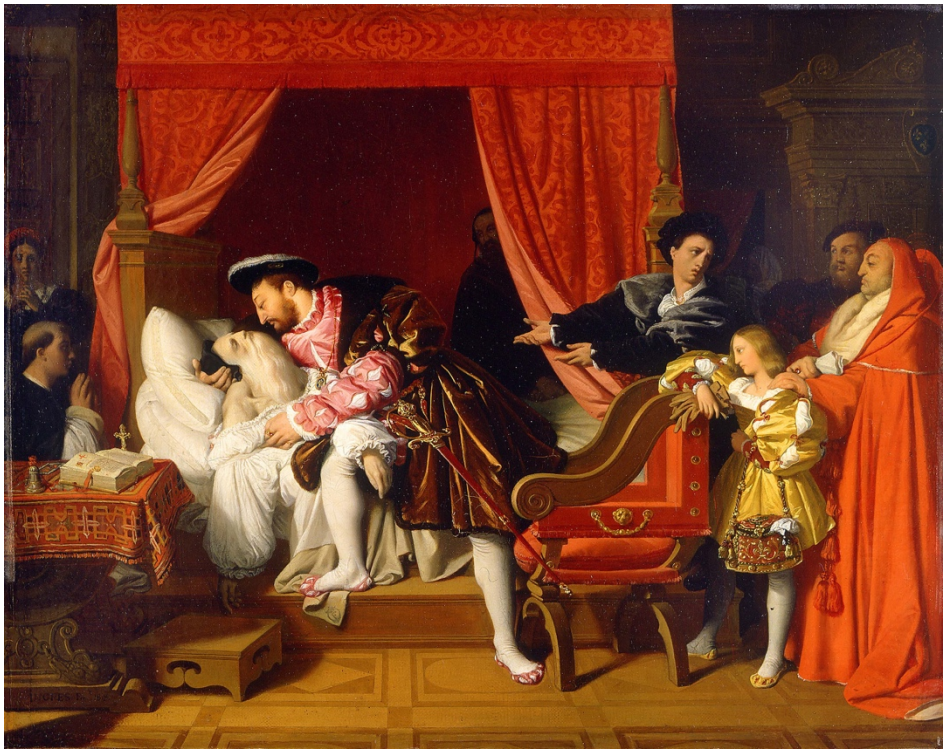
Works by William-Adolphe Bouguereau, Alexandre Cabanel, and Thomas Couture, often dripping with patriotic sentimentalism, ruled supreme in the annual Salons, virtually the only

conduit by which aspiring French artists could gain recognition and patronage. Scores of wealthy buyers invariably took their cue from what Napoleon III and his wife Eugénie considered great art. That taste was exemplified by Bouguereau's *Birth of Venus,* which manages to blend its Raphaelesque conception with a sly, almost shocking eroticism.[iii]

Although Raphael was cited as the most perfect embodiment of the classical ideal, Leonardo da Vinci came in as a close second. One subject that achieved almost instant popularity was the legend that Leonardo had died in the presence of the French king. According to Vasari, an inveterate font of gossip and tall tales, Leonardo had actually died in the arms of King François I. An enterprising French researcher, Léon de Laborde, discovered that on the day after Leonardo's death, François I was actually in St.-Germain-en-Laye to sign an edict, so the story was pure fantasy.[iv]

Nevertheless, the legend persisted. François-Guillaume Ménageot, a pupil of Boucher, painted an affectionate scene of Leonardo's death in 1781, reportedly based on Vasari's description. This was followed in 1828 by a similarly sentimental, Biedemeier-like depiction by Italian academic painter Cesare Mussini.

But by far the most famous depiction of Leonardo's passing was painted by the ruling leader of French neo-classicism, Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres. Commissioned by the Comte de Blacas, the French Ambassador in Rome, the painting shows the king cradling the frail old artist in his arms as Leonardo breathes his last.



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Death of Leonardo in the Arms of François I*, 1818

What few modern observers realize, however, is that the painting was a not-so-subtle exercise in monarchist propaganda. De Blacas served the reign of Louis XVIII, the corpulent king who had been foisted on the French throne by the European powers after the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo. By restoring the rule of the French House of Bourbon after the havoc of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, Europe's kings hoped to stabilize France and bring it once again into the family of nations. The Ingres painting was therefore meant to convince the people of the innate compassion of the French monarchy, exemplified by a king who went out of his way to comfort a legendary painter in the hour of his death. Lest that message not be properly understood, the French government rushed out prints of the scene, including a superb rendering in Joseph Théodore Richomme.

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[i] In England, the Royal Academy was governed—literally—by painters like Frederic Leighton and Lawrence Alma-Tadema, who sought their inspiration from classical and biblical texts, executed with an almost obsessive eye for archaeological detail.

[ii] Louis-Napoléon, as he was formally called, first ruled as President of France from 1848 to 1852, and then proclaimed a *Second Empire* that lasted until the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870.

[iii] So pervasive was this academism that a reaction broke out in England early on that called itself, tellingly, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Founded by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, and William Holman Hunt, this group devoted itself to finding the original, unmannered spirit of the Renaissance, before the art of Raphael and Da Vinci became canonized as fixed doctrine. In France, the rule of the Academy would elicit another reaction, that of the Impressionists, who instead sought inspiration in the motif and travails of modern life.

[iv] St.-Germain-en-Laye, as modern commuters know all too well, lies northwest of Paris, at a distance from Amboise of some 165 miles; to cover the distance, the king would have had to race at a full gallop, straight through the night, which is unlikely. Some scholars now question whether the edict would have required the king to be present, since it doesn't bear his actual signature; merely his name. That could have placed him in Amboise on May 2. Nevertheless, the sentimentality of the scene makes it certainly suspicious.