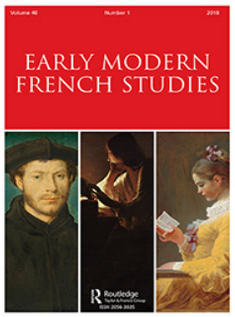

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Diderot and the Materiality of Posterity

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Art decays over time, so why should artists put faith in posterity? This question became a major source of disagreement in the correspondence between Denis Diderot and the sculptor Étienne-Maurice Falconet. For Falconet, art's physical instability rendered posterity meaningless. Diderot, however, refused to accept this perspective. He insisted that writers like him would save great art for future generations using vivid descriptions, delivering paintings and sculptures to posterity in words. This article argues that the disagreement between the two men stemmed from a broader historical conflict. Put simply, art and writing were developing divergent ways of travelling across time. The reproduction and dissemination of writing in the Enlightenment public sphere assured authors that their work would survive in a textual network that grew more and more indestructible in its diffuseness and redundancy. Art, however, was increasingly appreciated for material properties that resisted transmission and translation. Diderot grappled with this historical split throughout his writings on art, at times insisting on the sufficiency of language in preserving art for posterity and, at other moments, acknowledging the incommunicable materiality of visual media. His conflicted statements about artistic posterity offer an opportunity to consider what gets lost when history is reduced to the reproducible page.

KEYWORDS Diderot, Falconet, posterity, materiality, art, language, decay

History is riddled with lost and broken works, paintings in tatters and manuscripts gone up in flames. The problem of loss may be timeless, but the answers that we offer in the face of it are not. Few periods confronted the issue more directly than the French Enlightenment, and none of its thinkers offered a more forceful response than the philosopher and critic Denis Diderot.

Diderot was compelled to address the problem of loss in a now famous debate on posterity with the sculptor Étienne-Maurice Falconet. The ostensible topic of the argument, which unfolded over a series of letters between 1765 and 1767, was

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whether posterity drove men to produce great work.[1] Diderot maintained that it did, but Falconet took the opposite position, in large part because he saw little guarantee that art would survive for future generations. At the root of a philosophical question, then, was a practical one: what importance can we grant an audience that might inherit nothing more than the detritus of our labours?

It was in reply to this question that Diderot offered an answer particular to his time. He argued that the Enlightenment public sphere, through the combined powers of reproduction and dissemination, had inaugurated an age of imperishable knowledge. 'Il y a deux grandes inventions', he told Falconet: 'la poste qui porte presque en six semaines une découverte de l'équateur au pôle, et l'imprimerie qui la fixe à jamais.'[2]

Like the digital cloud that now purports to protect our electronic files through an endless network of servers, the eighteenth century's interconnected web of communication promised a backup system that was indestructible in its diffuseness and redundancy.[3] Nothing short of global devastation, Diderot claimed, could erase this distributed information stream. He insisted that even Falconet's sculptures would survive through the Enlightenment's enduring communication network. The sculptures themselves might succumb to decay, he admitted, but they would live on through the words of writers like him, in written testimony that circulated around the globe. 'Tu subsisteras éternellement', he told Falconet, 'ou dans un fragment de marbre, ou plus sûrement encore dans quelques-unes de nos lignes'.[4]

But art, more than Diderot wished to concede, tested the limits of the Enlightenment's supposedly everlasting web of knowledge. As Falconet was quick to point out, art depended on material qualities that were inseparable from the original object. Reluctant though he was to admit it, Diderot appreciated this fact. For the better part of a decade, he had written reviews of the Paris Salon exhibitions, often conceding that he could not find adequate words for the ineffable material presence of the works on display.

Scholars have long noted Diderot's conflicted statements about art's materiality. In an influential analysis, Norman Bryson presented this conflict in semiological terms, arguing that Diderot's art criticism grapples with the opposition between the 'discursive' and the 'figural' — the divide between what we can reduce to linguistic

[1] The exchange remained unpublished in Diderot's lifetime. I will refer to the version in the Hermann edition of Diderot's *Œuvres complètes*, which examines the competing drafts of the manuscripts and their complicated path to publication: 'Le Pour et le Contre', ed. by Emita Hill, in *Œuvres complètes*, 25 vols (Paris: Hermann, 1975–), XV; for an overview of the debate's key themes, see Martin Papenheim, 'Le Pour et le Contre: la correspondance entre le philosophe Diderot et l'artiste Falconet sur la posterité et l'immortalisation', in *L'Art et les normes sociales au XVIII^e siècle*, ed. Thomas W. Gaehtgens (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2001), pp. 331–41; Marc Buffat, 'Diderot, Falconet et l'amour de la postérité', *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie*, 43 (2008), 9–20.

[2] Diderot, 'Le Pour et le Contre', p. 9.

[3] As anachronistic as the analogy may seem, recent scholarship has underscored the ways in which the eighteenth century's nodal communication systems gave rise to concepts that continue to underpin the modern notion of the network. Nicolas Verdier, 'Le réseau technique est-il un impensé du XVIII^e siècle: le cas de la poste aux chevaux', *Flux*, 68.2 (2007), 7–21; on the expansion of postal networks more generally, see Jay Caplan, *Postal Culture in Europe, 1500-1800*, Oxford Studies in the Enlightenment (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2016).

[4] Diderot, 'Le Pour et le Contre', p. 9.

description and what we can experience only in its irreducible material form.[5] Subsequent studies have situated Diderot's attempts to translate art into words within his broader intellectual preoccupations, from sensorial philosophy to the nature of language.[6] Others have related his ambivalence over art's physical properties to the changing aesthetic priorities of the period, a moment when a growing emphasis on art's material qualities called into question the capacity of words to describe them.[7]

But behind Diderot's efforts to reconcile objects with words lay a deeper historical fissure, one that has gone largely unexplored. Put simply, art and writing were developing dramatically different relationships with posterity. The public sphere, as Diderot recognized, had expanded the means through which knowledge was transmitted to future generations, but its potential was limited to what was easily reproduced on a page. Visual art, in its material specificity, proved especially resistant. Colour, texture, and the physical traces of the artist's hand had become essential to the modern understanding of artistic achievement, and none of these qualities were easily assimilated into the expanding apparatus of reproduction and dissemination. A scrupulous typesetter could reproduce an author's words without changing their significance, but even the most skilful printmaker could not copy a painter's brushstrokes without fundamentally altering them. The tools of replication and circulation that secured the Enlightenment's historical record therefore offered unequal assurances to artists and writers. Posterity had become specific to the medium, and visual art remained stubbornly bound to the present.

In what follows, I revisit Diderot's art criticism in light of both his debate with Falconet and this broader historical cleavage between objects and words. To take such an approach is, in the most limited sense, to offer some additional historical context for Diderot's writing on art, one more link between his criticism and the larger sphere of events and ideas that they occupied. But it is also, in a much more far-reaching sense, a methodological invitation to consider the material means through which we encounter our objects of study. The eighteenth century was a moment that extensively reconstructed the physical lines of communication that link past, present, and future. Diderot's writing on art offers an opportunity to examine how those lines were formed, what they were designed to carry, and what they fail to transmit.

[5] Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 179–203.

[6] The literature on these issues is vast and can only be selectively acknowledged here. For a recent treatment of the *Salons* and Diderot's inquiry into language — along with an extensive survey of the prior scholarship — see Élise Pavy-Guilbert, *L'Image et la langue: Diderot à l'épreuve du langage dans les Salons* (Paris: Editions Classiques Garnier, 2014); see also Tom Baldwin, 'Diderot's Salons: Ekphrasis and Related Issues', in *New Essays on Diderot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 234–47.

[7] Several recent articles have contextualized Diderot's criticism within a broader breakdown of the doctrine of *ut pictura poesis* prompted by a growing concern for art's material specificity. See in particular Stéphane Lojkine, 'Le technique contre l'idéal: la crise de *l'ut pictura poesis* dans les *Salons* de Diderot', in *Aux limites de l'imitation: l'ut pictura poesis à l'épreuve de la matière (XVI^{e}-XVIII^{e} siècles)*, ed. by Ralph Dekoninck, Agnès Guiderdoni-Bruslé, and Nathalie Kremer (New York: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 121–40; Annie Mavrakis, 'Ce n'est pas de la poésie; ce n'est que de la peinture', *Poétique*, 153 (February 2008), 63–80.

Fragile Pictures

By the time Diderot started writing art criticism in 1759, art's vulnerability to destruction had already become a topic of heated discussion. From the moment that art entered the public sphere in the middle of the eighteenth century, artists' techniques and their durability were subjected to unprecedented scrutiny and debate.[8] When the critic Étienne La Font de Saint-Yenne published one of the first pieces of modern art criticism in 1747, he lambasted contemporary painters for the 'peu de durée' of the works that they produced and chastised the French state for failing to protect art from the forces of physical decay.[9] In the years that followed, the issue of impermanence featured regularly in critical writing on the arts. The antiquarian and amateur the Comte de Caylus offered one of the gravest assessments of art's material fate in a review of the Salon exhibition held in 1751. Surveying the state of modern paintings, he declared, 'Tous les jours nous les voyons périr sous nos yeux'. [10]

Diderot soon took an interest in these debates, showing particular concern for their technical details. His responsibilities as editor of the *Encyclopédie* likely prompted him to follow such practical discussions, and his friendships with artists kept him abreast of studio practices.[11] When Caylus began working with artists to create more durable pictures using an obscure process involving molten wax, Diderot pressured him to reveal the details of the method. He collaborated with the artist Jean-Jacques Bachelier to investigate the medium, and in 1755 they released their own treatise on the technique.[12] Diderot soon distanced himself from these experimental practices, but he remained fascinated by the material properties that ensured art's longevity. His Salon reviews are full of small pieces of advice on the topic. In 1763, he wrote that painters should eliminate lime and saline substances from their work and only use earth pigments.[13] Two years later, he reminded artists not to overwork their colours, explaining that excessive mixing often results in unstable combinations of materials.[14] In 1767, he applauded those artists who took into account the aging of their materials. Chardin and Vernet, he explained, imagine how their work will appear twelve years after completion.[15]

But in spite of endorsing these practices, Diderot indicated that such technical precautions were no guarantee of permanence. A student of chemistry and materialist

[8] On the entry of art into the public sphere and the rise of art criticism in eighteenth-century Paris, see Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Richard Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism: From the Ancien Régime to the Restoration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

[9] Étienne La Font de Saint-Yenne, *Reflexions sur quelques causes de l'état présent de la peinture en France* (La Haye: chez Jean Neaulme, 1747), p. 98. On the parallels between La Font's criticism and Diderot's writing on technique, see Julie Boch, 'L'art et la matière: Diderot et La Font de Saint-Yenne', in *Aux limites*, pp. 103–20.

[10] 'Exposition des ouvrages de l'Académie Royale de Peinture', *Mercure de France*, October 1751, 158–59.

[11] Jacques Proust, 'L'initiation artistique de Diderot', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 55 (April 1960), 225–32; Christian Michel, 'Les conseillers artistiques de Diderot', *Revue de l'art*, 66 (1984), 9–16.

[12] Diderot, *L'Histoire et le secret de la peinture en cire* ([n.p.], 1755).

[13] Diderot, 'Salon de 1763', in *Œuvres complètes*, XIII, pp. 352–53.

[14] Diderot, 'Essais sur la peinture', ed. by Gita May, in *Œuvres complètes*, XIV, pp. 352–53.

[15] 'Chardin et Vernet voient leurs ouvrages à douze ans du moment où ils peignent'. Diderot, 'Salon de 1767', ed. by Annette Lorenceau, in *Œuvres complètes*, XVI, p. 172.

philosophy, he had reason to believe that physical change was an inevitable reality, a quality inherent in matter itself.[16] He applauded the wisdom of the artist Jacques-André Naigeon, who rejected the idea that time improves art. Diderot quotes Naigeon as saying, 'On dit que le temps peint les beaux tableaux … cela ne doit s'entendre que d'un certain intervalle de temps, passé lequel toute composition rongée par l'acide de l'air s'affaiblit et s'efface'.[17] To this Diderot replies, 'Fort bien […] il y a plaisir à vous entendre'.[18]

In the long run, any material object was destined to decompose. Diderot described decay as 'une loi générale qui s'exécute sur le bronze', observing that even statues deteriorated with time.[19] In this important respect, he went much further than the critics of the preceding decades. Though he praised artists who sought to make durable works, he also recognized that these efforts would only take them so far. In a letter to Falconet, he put the problem bluntly: 'Mille causes physiques menacent votre chef-d'œuvre et peuvent en un instant le mettre en pièces'.[20] He argued that only the critic's medium of text, in its limitless transmissibility and reproducibility, could escape matter's flux: 'Mon chef-d'œuvre', Diderot declared, 'est à l'abri de tout événement'.[21] When Falconet dismissed the idea, Diderot offered a harsher warning: 'Ne dédaignez pas mes deux lignes. Ces deux lignes resteront! Le temps anéantira tout excepté ce que j'écris'.[22]

Durable Words

Writing, of course, was not immune from the forces of destruction.[23] Diderot knew as much. His letters occasionally disappeared in the mail, which bothered him greatly. 'Ah', he wrote to Falconet, 'que je suis fâché de mes lettres perdues!'.[24] Even Diderot's art criticism could have very easily been consigned to obscurity. During his lifetime, his Salon reviews circulated solely through his friend Friedrich Melchior Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire*, a hand-transcribed newsletter sent to a handful of elite subscribers outside of France. Only in the nineteenth century did the reviews appear in print, and their initial survival depended less on the powers of the printing press

[16] The importance of chemical thinking to Diderot's aesthetic and literary interests has become an area of growing research. See Fumie Kawamura, *Diderot et la chimie: science, pensée et écriture* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013); François Pépin, *La Philosophie expérimentale de Diderot et la chimie: philosophie, sciences et arts* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012); on the relationship between Diderot's aesthetics and materialist metaphysics, see also Kate E. Tunstall, 'Diderot, Chardin et la matière sensible', *Dix-huitième siècle*, 39: 1 (2007), 577–93.

[17] Diderot, 'Salon de 1767', p. 160.

[18] Diderot, 'Salon de 1767', p. 161.

[19] Diderot, 'Salon de 1767', p. 338.

[20] Diderot, 'Le Pour et le Contre', p. 42.

[21] Diderot, 'Le Pour et le Contre', p. 42.

[22] Diderot, 'Le Pour et le Contre', p. 47.

[23] In addition to the material destruction of writing, we might also consider the threat posed by misinterpretation, shifts in taste, and the overturning of canons. Indeed, as Olivier Ritz shows in his contribution to this volume (CROSS REF), authors working in the aftermath of the Revolution came to see the physical destruction of art as a metaphor for the many contingencies that affected literary posterity.

[24] Letter from Diderot to Falconet, May 1769. Denis Diderot, *Correspondance*, 16 vols (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1955), IX, p. 59–60.

than on the devoted readers who cared enough to save copies of the original manuscripts.[25] But Diderot's proclamations of faith in the durability of words, naive or delusional as they might seem, were based upon an underlying historical truth. Fires and floods could claim texts, but as long as a copy existed somewhere, the words would endure. No matter how yellowed or faded the pages, texts survived if they remained legible. The material form, the physical substrate that supported the words, did not significantly impinge upon their meaning.

The fate of discoloured or flaking paintings, by contrast, was not so simple. By the middle of the eighteenth century, art's definition had become increasingly inextricable from its materiality. The physical trace of the artist's hand, which had long served as a tool for attributing and authenticating artworks among connoisseurs, had by now emerged as a source of aesthetic pleasure in its own right.[26] Colour and facture acted as vehicles for imaginative exploration, a subjective engagement with the object that became inseparable from its meaning and historical importance.[27] Any changes to these material qualities raised a troubling possibility: the work, in both a physical and ontological sense, might no longer be itself.[28]

From almost his first piece of art criticism, Diderot began to contemplate this fact. And what struck him at the outset was both its implications for an artist's posterity and the way that it created a rupture between an artist's fate and his own. It was in his second exhibition review, writing in response to the 1761 Salon, that he began to give the topic serious consideration. A particular painting called it to his attention: Amedée Van Loo's bacchanalian depiction of a satyr and his family revelling around a wine cask (fig. 1).

The picture's sensuous surface beguiled Diderot. 'Voyez comme cela est peint', he beckoned.[29] The skin tones especially ravished him: 'Est-ce que ces chairs-là ne sont pas bien vraies?'.[30] But no sooner did he delight in these effects than he confronted a problem. How long would such radiant colour last? The thought prompted a broader reflection:

> Le sort du peintre ne ressemble pas du tout à celui de l'écrivain. C'est le style qui assure l'immortalité à un ouvrage de littérature; c'est cette qualité qui charme les contemporains

[25] On the uncertain path of Diderot's writings to publication, see Herbert Dieckmann, *Inventaire du fonds Vandeul et inédits de Diderot* (Geneva: Droz, 1951).

[26] These developments, which I only signal schematically here, have a long and complex history whose origins date back at least to the late seventeenth century. They are tied both to an aesthetic reorientation toward art's materiality in the writings of influential art theorists such as Roger de Piles and a social restructuring in the modes of artistic consumption, witnessed most notably in the emergence of a new type of viewer — the *amateur* — who placed a new priority on subjective pleasure. On the evolving status of art's physical characteristics, see Donald Posner, 'Concerning the 'Mechanical' Parts of Painting and the Artistic Culture of Seventeenth-Century France', *The Art Bulletin* 75.4 (December 1993), 583–98. On the figure of the *amateur*, see Charlotte Guichard, *Les Amateurs d'art à Paris au XVIII^e siècle* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2008).

[27] On the ascendency of colour as an essential and irreducible component of aesthetic experience, see Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *La Couleur éloquente: rhétorique et peinture à l'âge classique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989).

[28] It is hardly coincidental that the eighteenth century saw the gradual emergence of modern conservation practices. Two recent studies have admirably traced this history: Noémie Étienne, *La Restauration des peintures à Paris: 1750-1815* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2012) and Ann Massing, *Painting Restoration before La Restauration: The Origins of the Profession in France* (London: Hamilton Kerr Institute, 2012).

[29] Denis Diderot, 'Salon de 1761', in *Œuvres complètes*, XIII, p. 242.

[30] Diderot, 'Salon de 1761' p. 242.

FIGURE 1. Amédée van Loo, *The Satyrs,* ca. 1761, oil on canvas, 145 × 113 cm. Milwaukee Art Museum. Photograph © Milwaukee Art Museum.

de l'auteur, et qui charmera les siècles à venir. Au contraire la couleur d'un morceau de peinture passe. La réputation d'un grand peintre ne s'étend souvent parmi ses contemporains et ne se transmet à la postérité que par les qualités que la gravure peut conserver. Ainsi le mérite du coloris disparaît.[31]

[31] Diderot, 'Salon de 1761', p. 242.

The problem, for Diderot, had become clear: the writer and the painter did not share the same fate. When it came to posterity, Diderot placed them on opposite ends of a spectrum. Or perhaps it was less of a spectrum than a chasm — a divide between those arts that depended upon their original materiality for their survival and those that did not. All of which led to a natural question: to what degree was it possible to bridge the gap?

Reproductive prints, Diderot acknowledged, offered some help, but they also suffered from serious limitations. Diderot often contemplated the imperfection of prints as preservatives, reiterating the important role that they played in saving art for posterity while bemoaning their inadequacy in performing the task.[32] 'Mais qu'est-ce qu'une estampe', he asked in 1767, 'en comparaison d'un tableau?'.[33] He argued that seeing a painting in print was, at best, like reading a great work of classical literature in translation. Excellent translations existed, ones that achieved an artfulness all their own, but even the best of them lacked the essence of original. 'Il faut avouer', he concluded, 'qu'à côté de la peinture, le rôle de la gravure est bien froid'.[34] What prints omitted, in the end, was not simply colour in a literal sense, but colour in a more figurative sense. They lost the magic and the soul, the subtle alchemy of materials that brought the original work to life.

But prints were not the only possible way of giving fragile pictures a more enduring form. Diderot's lament for the painter's fate in 1761 hinted at another solution. He established an analogy: 'la couleur est dans un tableau, ce que le style est dans un morceau de littérature'.[35] The comparison was meant to highlight the divergent afterlives of painting and literature, but it also suggested a way of reconciling them: perhaps the ephemeral properties of one medium could be converted into the more durable attributes of the other.

Many writers before Diderot, of course, had considered the idea that their words might save artists from oblivion. Few went further than the sixteenth-century Italian writer and painter Giorgio Vasari in attempting to create a lasting textual monument to artists. When Vasari published the second edition of his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* in 1568, he included a frontispiece whose inscription made his ambitions clear: 'I proclaim that with this breath these men have never perished.'[36] But what distinguished Diderot's immortalizing ambition was a shift in emphasis, a turn away from the artist's life and toward the work itself, in all its material specificity.

[32] For a comprehensive survey of Diderot's views on prints, see Philip Stewart, 'Le rôle de la gravure dans l'œuvre de Diderot', in *Colloque international Diderot* (Paris: Aux Amateurs de Livres, 1985), pp. 347–56; Christian Michel, 'Diderot et la gravure', in *Diderot et l'art de Boucher à David: les Salons, 1759-1781*, ed. by Marie Sahut and Nathalie Volle (Paris: Ministère de la culture, Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1984), pp. 484–88.

[33] Diderot, 'Salon de 1767', p. 56.

[34] Diderot, 'Salon de 1767', p. 506.

[35] Diderot, 'Salon de 1761', p. 242.

[36] Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. by Gaston du C. De Vere, 2 vols (New York: Knopf, 1996), I, p. 163; on Vasari's immortalizing ambition, see Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Art as Rebirth and the Immortality of the Ideal Man', in *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), pp. 53–84.

The obvious question that Diderot faced was whether writing was up to the task. Falconet continually pushed him on this point. He often reminded Diderot about all the writers throughout history who had misrepresented artists' works, particularly their material properties. The two men spent months arguing over the writings of the ancient Greek traveller Pausanias, whose description of a lost mural by the painter Polygnotus had become a source of endless fascination in eighteenth-century antiquarian circles. In 1761, the comte de Caylus published a commentary on the missing work along with an illustration of how he imagined it to look (fig. 2).

For Falconet, these efforts to recreate a lost painting from a description encapsulated the futility of any attempt to save art through writing. The heart of the problem, as he saw it, was the fact that no written description could do justice to the materiality of an artist's technique. Even if a description could conjure a picture's broad outlines, it could never bring the lost work back to life. '[S]ans technique, point de peinture', Falconet declared.[37] Diderot initially dismissed the objection. 'Sans technique, point de peinture, il est vrai', he replied, 'mais que m'importe la peinture sans idée, et à tout prendre, j'aime encore mieux des idées que de la couleur'.[38] But Diderot recognized the importance of Falconet's claim, and he soon clarified his position. Writers, he acknowledged in a letter several months later, begin from a deficit when it comes to rendering the beauty of the physical world. 'La palette de poète', he told Falconet, 'c'est la langue'.[39] This simple fact, Diderot explained, meant that most writers fail to capture the materiality of the world with a painter's vibrancy: 'les couleurs qui ne manquent jamais à l'artiste, quelque lieu du monde qu'il habite, ont manqué à mon poète, et il n'y a point de reproche à lui faire; c'est malgré lui qu'il a été mauvais coloriste'.[40] But Diderot stopped short of conceding that no writer could overcome this challenge. Pausanias might not have been up to the task, but that hardly meant that it was impossible.[41]

A year after this exchange with Falconet, in 1767, Diderot would write his longest *Salon* to date, and in both size and content it reads as a passionate defence of poetic description's potential.[42] 'Le poète a sa palette comme le peintre', Diderot would announce several hundred pages in, repeating nearly word for word his comments to Falconet.[43] Only this time, Diderot strikes a more triumphant tone, emphasizing less the insufficiency than the richness of the poet's palette. 'Sa langue lui offre toutes les teintes imaginables', Diderot declared; 'c'est à lui à les bien choisir. Il a son clair-obscur dont la source et les règles sont au fond de son âme'.[44]

[37] Diderot, 'Le Pour et le Contre', p. 120.
[38] Diderot, 'Le Pour et le Contre', p. 130.
[39] Diderot, 'Le Pour et le Contre', p. 222.
[40] Diderot, 'Le Pour et le Contre', p. 222.
[41] Diderot would later tell Falconet that Pausanias's writings amounted to nothing more than 'l'insipide description d'un voyageur'. Diderot, *Correspondance*, XII, p. 239.
[42] Here I disagree with Shane Agin's provocative assertion that Falconet had dealt a fatal blow to Diderot's critical ambitions. In support of his claim, Agin cites the passages from Diderot's 1767 *Salon* in which he acknowledges the limitations of linguistic description. But Diderot had made such admissions well before 1767. As I explore in more detail below, such statements figured in his criticism going back to at least 1763, and they can hardly be taken at face value. See Shane Agin, 'The Development of Diderot's 'Salons' and the Shifting Boundary of Representational Language', *Diderot Studies*, 30 (2007), 11–29.
[43] Diderot, 'Salon de 1767', p. 383.
[44] Diderot, 'Salon de 1767', p. 383.

FIGURE 2. Louis-Joseph Le Lorrain, *L'Embarquement des Grecs après la prise de Troye*, etching, from 'Description de deux tableaux de Polygnote donnée par Pausanias', in *Histoire de l'Académie royale des inscriptions et belles-lettres*, 27 (1761), 34-55. Widener Library, Harvard University.

Here, then, was Diderot's answer to the limitations of his medium. What the writer lacked in material resources, he compensated for with passion and verve. Diderot had developed a version of this argument over the preceding years. In a well-known passage from 1763, he explained that describing a Salon required 'un cœur sensible à tous les charmes, une âme susceptible d'une infinité d'enthousiasmes différents, une variété de style qui répondît à la variété des pinceaux'.[45] Scholars have often presented these statements as Diderot's declaration of his own creative powers, a manifestation of his desire to compete with artists on their own territory.[46] But if Diderot saw himself as artists' competitor, then he also positioned himself as their saviour. The two roles went hand in hand. It was this ability to match — or perhaps even exceed — artists' ravishing creations that granted him the authority to rescue their work from oblivion.

Material Matters

Diderot's avowed confidence in his poetic power to perpetuate art, however, was far from unwavering. One of the well-known features of Diderot's art criticism is his occasional performance of speechlessness in the face of certain artists' works. His professed inability to describe a painting, of course, can sometimes simply be one more way of conveying the work's overwhelming effect — a disavowal of writing intended only to amplify its impact. But read in relation to Diderot's preoccupation with art's afterlife, these moments take on additional significance, marking the point at which his line of communication with posterity begins to fray.

Among all the artists who tested the limits of Diderot's descriptive abilities, few did it quite so often as Joseph Vernet. Beginning with the Salon of 1763, Diderot conceded the insufficiency of his words each time he faced Vernet's seascapes. 'Il n'est presque pas possible d'en parler', Diderot wrote that year; 'il faut les voir'.[47] After the following Salon, Vernet extracted a similar admission from Diderot: 'Il est impossible de rendre ses compositions', he insisted again; 'il faut les voir'.[48] And again in 1767, he writes of one of Vernet's most admired paintings: 'Mais encore une fois, il faut le voir'.[49]

The supposed impossibility of the task, however, did not stop Diderot from trying. Over these years, he offered ever-longer responses to Vernet's work, each time bemoaning the insufficiency of language while remaining unable to withhold it. These paeans to Vernet's paintings have been widely acknowledged as some of Diderot's most inventive writings on art, passages in which he tested his powers of poetic expression and pushed his ekphrastic capabilities to their limits.[50] These writerly strategies, which oscillate between empirical analysis of the paintings' technical qualities and dream-like exploration of their hallucinatory effects, merit the careful study that scholars have accorded them. What interests me, however, is

[45] Diderot, 'Salon de 1763', p. 341.
[46] See in particular Jean Starobinski, 'Diderot dans l'espace des peintres', in *Diderot et l'art*, pp. 21–40.
[47] Diderot, 'Salon de 1763', p. 386.
[48] Diderot, 'Salon de 1765', ed. by Annette Lorenceau, in *Œuvres complètes*, XIV, p. 135.
[49] Diderot, 'Salon de 1767', p. 226.

less the details of the strategies themselves than the temporal consciousness that suffuses them.

At the heart of Diderot's fascination with Vernet was a concern for time. 'Vernet est bien avec le temps qui fait tant de mal à ses confrères', he wrote in 1769.[51] Diderot was restating his old observation that Vernet anticipated the way his paintings would age, but the comment implied something more. Time, in a sense, was also Vernet's subject matter. Whether he was painting different times of day, changing seasons, or fluctuating meteorological effects, Vernet trafficked in time (the French word *temps* makes weather's temporal dimension much clearer than the English).

It was this double function of time, acting both within and upon Vernet's paintings, that came to enthrall Diderot. None of Vernet's pictures prompted him to contemplate it more than the storm scene that hung above his own writing desk (fig. 3). Vernet painted the picture in 1768, and it soon took a privileged place in Diderot's apartment. Within months, he set out to capture it in words, giving it a central role in a short text entitled 'Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre'.[52] What Diderot emphasized about the picture was not simply Vernet's technical virtuosity, but the destructive natural forces that he depicted — forces that invited Diderot to imagine the painting's own annihilation.

The text begins on a somewhat different note. Diderot's ostensible topic is his self-consciousness over his luxurious possessions, and he opens with a lament for his increasingly opulent lifestyle.[53] Vernet's painting is just one of many sumptuous new objects filling Diderot's apartment, each one having displaced a more modest item from his past. Having surveyed his lavishly appointed home, Diderot worries over its corrupting influence. In a fit of desperation, he tells his friend Grimm to pray that God will destroy all these objects — all, that is, except Vernet's painting. Diderot immediately begins to contemplate the picture's destruction, and it is a thought too painful to bear. The entire second half of the essay is devoted to this nightmarish prospect.

The painting's catastrophic subject matter suddenly becomes, for Diderot, a metaphor for the picture's own potential demise. He begins speaking as if he were one of the marooned men depicted in the painting along the shore, praying not for his life but for the survival of the painting itself. The thunderous clouds and thrashing waves confront him with devastating forces beyond his control. The weathered rocks and twisted tree limbs testify to nature's slow erosion of all matter. Arguing that the picture is as divine as anything that God ever created, Diderot begs that it

[50] Nearly every scholar of Diderot's criticism has something to say about his writings on Vernet, and it would be impossible to survey them here. Bukdahl's foundational work highlighted many of the key features in these passages. For her, they exemplify Diderot's 'méthodes poétiques', his pursuit of language's maximal dramatic and emotive effect (Bukdahl, *Diderot, critique d'art*, I, pp. 305–10); for a more recent study of these passages with reference to much of the intervening scholarship, see Andrew H. Clark, 'Diderot's Encyclopedic Poetics', *The Eighteenth Century*, 53.1 (2012), 99–111.

[51] Diderot, 'Salon de 1769', p. 609.

[52] The text was sent to subscribers of the *Correspondance littéraire* in February of 1769; Denis Diderot, 'Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre', ed. by Jean Varloot, in *Œuvres complètes*, XVIII, pp. 41–60.

[53] On luxury and Diderot's 'Regrets', see most recently Katie Scott, 'The Philosopher's Room: Diderot's Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown', *Oxford Art Journal*, 39:2 (August 2016), 185–216.

FIGURE 3. Claude-Joseph Vernet, 1768, *Le naufrage*, oil on canvas, 65 × 81.5 cm. Private collection. Photograph © Sotheby's / Digital Studio / Westimage.

be spared God's wrath. 'Dieu', Diderot implores, 'si tu anéantis cet ouvrage de l'art, on dira que tu es un dieu jaloux'.[54] He beseeches God to be merciful, alternating between prayers for those shown in the painting and for the painting itself. 'Permets à ces matelots de remettre à flot leur navire échoué', he asks. 'Donne-leur des forces, et laisse-moi mon tableau'.[55]

Diderot's prayers, of course, are half in jest — the larger context of the essay, after all, is the light-hearted apologia of a man embarrassed by his riches. But the humour in it should not distract us from the very real threat of destruction upon which it plays. The picture's subject matter resonated with perils that Diderot had experienced first-hand.

Though he may never have snatched a painting's tattered remains from beneath pounding waves on a craggy shoreline, Diderot knew all too well that art was vulnerable to these forces. During the late 1760s, when Falconet was stationed in Saint Petersburg, he and Diderot regularly shipped art between Russia and France. Diderot acquired objects on behalf of Catherine the Great, and Falconet sent works back to Paris. As their correspondence testifies, the voyage across the Baltic was a perilous one. A delivery from Falconet in May of 1768 arrived badly

[54] Diderot, 'Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre', p. 58.
[55] Diderot, 'Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre', p. 59.

damaged, the result of saltwater having found its way into the box.[56] Diderot advised Falconet to take greater care with his packaging in the future. 'Je n'aime pas les reliques', he warned.[57] The admonition, however, proved futile. Another delivery reached Paris in even worse shape. Falconet had taken extra precautions with the shipment this time, sealing everything doubly within two crates and padding the objects with moss and other plant matter — the eighteenth century's version of Styrofoam. But when Diderot opened the crates, he discovered that water had once again penetrated them. In a letter to Falconet in March of 1769, he reported the bad news. The water, he lamented, 'a […] presque tout détruit'.[58]

These are the physical realities that Vernet's painting presented before Diderot's eyes. The destructive forces that it dramatizes, exaggerated though they may be, nonetheless spoke to events that a viewer like Diderot faced on a more quotidian level. For us, two and a half centuries later, it is sometimes difficult to remember that the sight of a ship's splintering stern once meant something real to a general audience. We tend to reduce these pictures to moral symbolism, placing them in a long and familiar artistic lineage devoted to the vanity of human endeavours, noting their inflection with secular sensibilities particular to the Enlightenment.[59] Vernet's painting no doubt borrows liberally from this tradition, as does Diderot's response. But they also address accidents and fears that pervaded the eighteenth century on a much more concrete level, calamities big and small that were part of daily life. The events that Vernet depicts threatened not just people at sea, but the continual flow of objects that filled their homes.[60] Art was no exception, particularly for artists like Vernet and Falconet whose works circulated in an international economy.[61] It was hardly accidental that Vernet often placed his signature, as he did in the case of Diderot's painting, on a wooden shipping crate being hauled ashore — an implicit acknowledgment of his own work's status as an imperilled object (fig. 4).[62]

[56] Diderot, *Correspondance*, VIII, p. 34. Lost in this particular delivery was a bust by Falconet's student, Marie-Anne Collot, who had joined him in Saint Petersburg. Her works seem to have particularly suffered in these shipments back to Paris. See Christiane Dellac, *Marie-Anne Collot: Une sculptrice française à la cour de Catherine II* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 2005), pp. 61–62.

[57] Diderot, *Correspondance*, VIII, p. 130.

[58] Diderot, *Correspondance*, IX, p. 44.

[59] Scholarship on Vernet's storm scenes tends to emphasize the way they mix traditional elements of the genre with the eighteenth century's concern for naturalism and the sublime. Philip Conisbee, *Joseph Vernet: 1714-1789* (Paris: Musée de la marine, 1976); Heather MacDonald, *Stormy Skies, Calm Waters: Vernet's Lansdowne Landscapes* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Museum of Art, 2011); on Diderot, Vernet, and the sublime, see Tomas Macsotay, 'Offering a Hermeneutics for Painted Landscapes: Diderot's view of Joseph Vernet as Sublime Painter', in *Penser l'art dans la seconde moitié du XVIII^e siècle: théorie, critique, philosophie, histoire*, ed. by Christian Michel and Carl Magnusson (Paris: Somogy, 2013), pp. 347–64.

[60] For an introduction to the perils and practical realities of shipping art in the second half of the eighteenth century, see *The English Prize: The Capture of the Westmorland, an Episode of the Grand Tour*, ed. by María Dolores Sánchez-Jáuregui and Scott Wilcox (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2012).

[61] Thanks to Vernet's careful book-keeping, we have a fairly good sense of his international clientele. For a partial version of his *livres de raison,* see Léon Lagrange, *Joseph Vernet et la peinture au XVIII^e siècle: avec le texte des Livres de raison, et un grand nombre de documents inédits* (Paris: Didier, 1864).

[62] Other examples in Vernet's work include: *The Shipwreck*, 1772, National Gallery, Washington; *A Shipwreck*, 1773, National Gallery, London; *Les abords d'une foire*, 1774, Musée Fabre, Montpellier.

FIGURE 4. Claude-Joseph Vernet, 1768, *Le naufrage* (detail), oil on canvas, 65 × 81.5 cm. Private collection. Photograph © Sotheby's / Digital Studio / Westimage.

Diderot saw all of this. In Vernet's painting, his dream of an imperishable global network of communication was reduced to reality: raw material moving through the world, vulnerable to every bump and wave that it encountered along the way. Here was a picture in which the mechanics of loss, the material perils that afflict our systems of dissemination and exchange, came into full view. These were the destructive forces that called every artist's posterity into question. Not even Vernet, so careful to anticipate the natural aging of his materials, could escape.

What made Vernet's work special, then, was not simply its resistance to Diderot's words, but the fact that it so powerfully demanded their preservative effect. Vernet was an artist who obviously merited the recognition of posterity, but who demonstrated precisely why he might not receive it. Perhaps more than any other artist, he confronted Diderot with the troubling combination of historical contingency and material incommunicability. He encapsulated for Diderot both the impossibility of translating art into language and the absolute necessity of doing so.

In this impossible combination lies the dilemma at the heart of Diderot's ambition. What he cannot describe, he must describe. And indeed he does describe these works, albeit in the form of artful pronouncements about his inability to do so, intricately crafted claims that only the object itself will suffice. Diderot's anguish over the potential destruction of Vernet's storm scene is chief among these statements. It reveals the paradoxical fact that Diderot's words are often at their most powerful in their supposed moments of weakness. Diderot's larger project, his line of communication with posterity, finds its strength in the places where it appears most bound to fail.

But what matters, in the end, is less Diderot's success or failure than the historical conditions that necessitated his aims, conditions that we have largely come to inherit. Many of us now live in an extension of the endlessly distributed and diffuse information streams that Diderot saw emerging, systems of reproduction and dissemination that continue to make promises of eternal knowledge. Diderot, we might imagine, would delight in some aspects of this contemporary reality, particularly the electronic afterlife of his work in digital form. But Diderot's dream of an imperishable global network should not blind us to his nightmare: the disappearance of what escapes transmission, the loss of the intimate pleasures afforded by material things. All objects are perhaps ultimately bound for oblivion, but let us not withhold our pleas that they remain. In the long run, Diderot reminds us, such appeals may be all that we have left.

Biographical Note

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