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ANTON (Saul), « Diderot's anarcheological Museum »

RÉSUMÉ – L'article analyse la description critique de l'art par Diderot dans le contexte de l'archéologie des années 1750-1760. En rejetant l'archéologie hellénistique de Winckelmann, Diderot façonne une poétique des ruines qui préfigure une histoire de l'art nationale. Cette anarchéologie défend la liberté artistique contre l'idéologie esthétique nationale.

MOTS-CLÉS – Diderot, musée archéologique, histoire de l'art, Encyclopédie, Winckelmann, encaustique, modèle idéal, Salon de 1765

## DIDEROT'S ANARCHEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

The story of modern archeology in the eighteenth century is generally told as a series of developments leading to the birth of art history and the modern museum. It often begins with the opening of new digs at Herculaneum and Pompei in the 1730s and 40s, when a new generation of antiquarians started to try to understand Greco-Roman artefacts outside a philologically and textually conceived antiquity. Whereas Bernard de Monfaucon's *Antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures* (1719-1724) upheld literary texts as the standard for evaluating artefacts, the comte de Caylus sought to decode them as "l'expression du goût qui regnoit dans un siècle & dans un pays<sup>1</sup>." In his *Recueil d'antiquités égyptiennes, étrusques, grecques, romaines et gauloises*, (1752-1765), perhaps the first true work of descriptive archeology, Caylus anticipated the East-to-West pattern of development that Johann Joachim Winckelmann used to propose a unified and linear history of art in his 1764 *History of the Art of Antiquity*. As many have observed, Winckelmann's *History* represents a watershed in European culture in which art is linked to modern national politics for the first time. Winckelmann saw ancient Greek sculpture as the historical origin of a transhistorical ideal of beauty, a standard of taste that was also the expression of political freedom: "[...] freedom was the chief reason for their art's superiority. Freedom always had its seat in Greece, even beside the thrones of the kings [...]."<sup>2</sup> With this claim, as François Hartog has remarked, Winckelmann's *History* turned antiquity from the abstract province of scholars and writers into a historico-geographical

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1 Caylus, *Recueil d'antiquités égyptiennes, étrusques, grecques et romaines*, Paris, Desaint & Saillant, vol. 1, p. 7.

2 Winckelmann, Johann Joachim, *The History of the Art of Antiquity*, traduit par Harry Francis Mallgrave, Los Angeles, The Getty Research Institute, 2006, p. 187.

and national-political origin of art<sup>3</sup>. In doing so, he paved the way for the founding of the Louvre as the first national museum of art. For the *Encyclopédie*, the museum was a disordered collection of curiosities exemplified by Oxford's Ashmolean, where Egyptian hieroglyphs mixed indifferently with a mummy, Roman altars, lamps, and medals<sup>4</sup>; however, in October, 1792, Jean-Marie Roland, the French minister of the interior, claimed the museum as a key institution of the new nation: "By embodying these grand ideas, worthy of a free people [...] the museum [...] will become among the most powerful illustrations of the French Republic<sup>5</sup>." By 1794, Jacques-Louis David could imagine the visual arts as the aesthetic medium of French political freedom and national history:

[...] écrivons, à la manière des anciens, notre histoire dans des monuments; qu'ils soient grands et immortels, comme la République que nous avons fondée, et que le génie des arts, conservateur des ouvrages sublimes que nous possédons, soit en même temps un génie créateur, et enfante de nouveaux chefs-d'œuvre<sup>6</sup>.

The story of archeology I have sketched begins with the liberation of artefacts from the authority of Greco-Roman literature and philosophy and ends with an aesthetic politics of Republican identity centered on the museum. At its core, this vision implies a close articulation between historical understanding and aesthetic judgment in which works of art

3 Hartog, François, *Anciens, modernes, sauvages*, Paris, Galaade, 2005, p. 84-85. See also Décultot, Élisabeth, *Jobann Joachim Winckelmann. Enquête sur la genèse de l'histoire de l'art*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2000. See also Harloe, K., *Winckelmann and the Invention of Antiquity: History and Aesthetics in the Age of Altertumswissenschaft*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

4 See "Musée", in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, etc., eds. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Spring 2021 Edition), Robert Morrissey and Glenn Roe (eds.), <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/> (consulté le 24 février 2024), vol. 10, p. 894.

5 In a letter cited in McClellan, Andrew, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994, p. 91-92.

6 David, Jacques-Louis, *Second rapport sur la nécessité de la suppression de la commission sur le museum*, 1794, p. 8. This national aesthetics, one might add, coupled with a hermeneutics of the subject that receives its fullest elaboration in Hegel's aesthetics. Hegel credits Winckelmann with enabling the "discovery of the Idea of art in works of art and the history of art". Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975, p. 63.

become the medium of national history. However, as the difference between the *Encyclopédie*'s and David's conceptions of the museum already suggests, I argue that this narrative is haunted by another understanding of art and its relation to history, one articulated by Denis Diderot.

Diderot's understanding of art and its relation to history emerges within a triple framework: first, his critique of seventeenth-century rationalist theories of language in his 1751 *Lettre sur les sourds et les muets* and eighteenth-century theories of taste founded on it, for example those of Charles Batteux and the abbé du Bos; second, in the *Encyclopédie*, his reflection on the production and transmission of knowledge and the description of the arts in the *Encyclopédie*; third, the relation between description, judgment, and taste in his writings on art in the 1760s. Clearly, it is impossible to consider all three elements of this framework within the scope of a single article, but I would like to show how they link the description of arts in the *Encyclopédie* to Diderot's writings on the problem of an ideal model and the use of the Horatian credo of *ut pictura poeisis* as a standard of taste. The importance of antiquity in Diderot's thought is well known, but less well understood is its specific role in his writings on art, and, in particular, in his confrontation with Winckelmann, who had become the leading European authority on antiquity by the 1760s. There was no one, according to one Parisian periodical, who "knows the ancients better than Winckelmann, who has better studied the admirable monuments which remain to us, who is more sensible to their beauties, and who knows how to describe them with more justice, taste and fire<sup>7</sup>." Diderot's two most important *Salons*, those of 1765 and 1767, his most important theoretical text on art, the 1766 *Essais sur la peinture*, and his correspondence with sculptor Etienne-Maurice Falconet, the so-called *Dispute sur la postérité*, are all written in the wake of *The History of the Art of Antiquity* and its 1766 French translation<sup>8</sup>. I argue that at the heart of his encounter with the painting and art of his time, Diderot articulates a conception of archeological description that differs substantially from the Winckelmannian vision of the museum proposed by David.

7 Cited in Irwin, David, *Winckelmann: Writings on Art*, Londres, Phaidon, 1973, p. 9.

8 In the same year, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing published *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Poetry and Painting*. Diderot's influence on him is well known, but I cannot consider it here. For a recent reassessment of Lessing's aesthetics, see Avi Lifschitz, Michael Squire (éds.), *Rethinking Lessing's Laocoön: Antiquity, Enlightenment and the 'Limits' of Painting and Poetry*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.

To begin, I would like to consider Diderot's *L'histoire et le secret de la peinture en cire*, a work of theoretical archeology that appears in 1755, the same year Winckelmann published his *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* (*Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*). Largely neglected by modern scholars due to its technical subject matter and seeming marginality to his celebrated *Salons*, it marks a key intersection between the latter, in which the problem of taste is paramount, and the epistemology of description and the historical transmission of knowledge at issue in the *Encyclopédie*. As Jean Seznec noted long ago, the text is a response to the comte de Caylus, Winckelmann's competitor and patron. In 1754, Caylus claimed in the *Mercur de France* that he had rediscovered the ancient art of encaustic described by Pliny in his *Natural History*, an ancient technique using hot wax as a binding medium for paint pigment dating back to Ancient Egypt and Greece. Joseph-Marie Vien, who later trained David, then painted a bust of Minerva using Caylus's instructions the two of them then exhibited at the salon of Madame Geoffrin. In July 1755, the antiquarian delivered a *mémoire* on the subject at the *Académie des belles-lettres*. In November, a second version of *L'histoire et le secret* appeared in the *Encyclopédie* as the article "Encaustique".<sup>9</sup>

Diderot famously disparaged Caylus as an "anticomane" and composed a sarcastic epitaph upon his death in 1765: "Ci-gît un antiquaire acariâtre et brusque / Ah! Qu'il est bien logé dans cette cruche étrusque"<sup>10</sup> *L'histoire et le secret*, however, is more than just a work of camp warfare. As its title implies, and because Caylus had sought to reproduce encaustic on the basis of Pliny's account, the text concerns the relation between the *history* and the *secret* of an art, that is, the relation between verbal descriptions of it and its practice. This relation is also crucial to Winckelmann's understanding of antiquity and represents the common ground between him and Diderot. The German antiquarian's popular success was due in part to his eloquent descriptions of works such as the *Belvedere Torso* and the *Laocoön*, much as Diderot's writings on art have

9 See Chouillet, Anne-Marie, « Introduction », dans Denis Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, édité par Herbert Dieckmann, Jean Fabre, Jacques Proust, Jean Varloot *et al.*, vol. 9, *L'histoire et le secret de la peinture en cire*, Paris, Hermann, 1975–, p. 125-131.

10 Diderot, Denis, dans *Diderot: Œuvres*, éd. Laurent Versini, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1994, vol. 5, p. 752.

long been lauded for their verve. Winckelmann reworked his descriptions obsessively, tying Greek sculpture back to a theory of imitation founded upon poetry<sup>11</sup>.

In fact, poetic description is crucial to Winckelmann's conception of antiquity. In the *Reflections*, he speaks of the critical judgment of *Laocoön's* ideal beauty as an act of seeing with a poet's eyes:

One must become as familiar with them [the ancients, especially the Greeks] as with a friend in order to find their statue of Laokoon [sic] just as inimitable as Homer. In such close acquaintance one learns to judge as Nicomachus judged Zeuxis' Helena: "Behold her with my eyes", he said to an ignorant person who found fault with this work of art, "and she will appear a goddess to you"<sup>12</sup>.

The analogy this passage asserts between the *Laocoön* and Homer as works that represent an ideal beauty sets up the poet as the paradoxically inimitable model for visual art. One must see the sculpture as if it possessed the ideal beauty of Helen described by Homer. In this *as if*, Winckelmann mobilizes the Horatian credo of *ut pictura poeisis* to create a historical ideal of taste and beauty that depends on the figurative transfer of the qualities of a poetic image to the visual work of art. Through metaphor, the material artwork receives the ideality of the poetic image; consequently, for him, *Laocoön* embodies an ideal of beauty and taste to those who can "see" with a poet's rather than a sculptor's eyes. Such an ideal was not a model of taste for Caylus; rather, it was a definition of encaustic that established a historical point of reference for his claim at having rediscovered a lost art.

In *L'histoire et le secret*, it is this seeing with Homer's eyes, that is, the metaphor between verbal and visual description, that is at issue. Diderot writes: "Ce mémoire aura deux objets principaux, l'histoire, et le secret<sup>13</sup>." *Contra* Caylus, he sees no way to deduce the *secret* of encaustic, its method from its *histoire*. In the article "Encyclopédie." he makes this

11 Caylus, *Recueil d'antiquités*, *op. cit.*, p. 7. See her introduction, « Le Spectateur comme Pygmalion » dans Élisabeth Décultot (éd.), *J. J. Winckelmann: De la Description*, Paris, Macula, 2006, p. 7-10. See also Potts, Alex, « Winckelmann's Construction of History », *Art History*, vol. 5, n° 4, 1982, p. 377-407.

12 Winckelmann, Johann Joachim., *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*, traduit par Elfriede Heyer et Roger C. Norton, La Salle, Il., Open Court, 1987, p. 5.

13 Diderot, Denis, *L'histoire et le secret de la peinture en cire*, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

point by underscoring the difference between description and substance: “[. . .] nous sommes sans cesse dans l’occasion de prononcer qu’une chose est *telle*; presque jamais dans la nécessité de déterminer ce que c’est qu’être *tel*”<sup>14</sup>. Further, this passage only restates Diderot’s argument in his 1751 *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* that there can be no rational historico-grammatical norm for linguistic reference, that language was radically descriptive: “On a regardé les qualités sensibles comme de simples accidents; et l’on s’est imaginé que l’adjectif était réellement subordonné au substantif, quoique le substantif ne soit proprement rien, et que *l’adjectif soit tout*”<sup>15</sup>.

The gulph between descriptive and substantive knowledge, for Diderot, implies that there is no simple way to move between verbal and pictorial representation. For Winckelmann, this difference is the source of the rise and fall of art, both the realization of ideal beauty in Greece and its eventual decline, the gulph separating the moderns from the ancients. For Diderot, by contrast, it implies another understanding of art’s historicity, one that opens onto the future rather than looks back to the past. In *L’histoire et le secret*, he begins by recounting how the painter Jean-Baptiste Bachelier accidentally came across a method of using wax as a medium for pigment in 1749, but abandoned it until Caylus and Vien publically proclaimed and exhibited their “rediscovery”: “Il y avait environ cinq ans que M. Bachelier, conduit par hasard à la peinture en cire, l’avait abandonnée, lorsque M. le comte de Caylus présenta à l’Académie la tête de Minerve [. . .]”<sup>16</sup> Although Bachelier discovered the technique first, Diderot insists that neither he nor Caylus ought to be credited with rediscovering the ancient method of encaustic described by Pliny:

14 Diderot, Denis, « Encyclopédie », *op. cit.*, vol. 5, p. 635.

15 Diderot, Denis, *Œuvres complètes*, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, *Lettre sur les sourds et muets à l’usage de ceux qui voient*, p. 135. As numerous scholars have shown, there is a tension at the heart of the project between the need for a representational ideal of language that could order and fix knowledge and the need for its transmission over time, its historicity. See Brewer, Daniel, « Language and Grammar: Diderot and the Discourse of Encyclopedism », *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 13, n° 1, p. 1-19. See also McDonald, Christie V., « The Utopia of the Text: Diderot’s ‘Encyclopédie’ », *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 21, n° 2, p. 128-144; and more recently, Stalnaker, J., « Diderot’s Word Machine », dans *The Unfinished Enlightenment: Description in the Age of the Encyclopedia*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2013, p. 99-123.

16 Diderot, Denis, *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

Car il sera évidemment démontré par la suite que la Minerve que M. le comte de Caylus a fait exécuter sur bois en 1755, et la Flore et le Zéphire que M. Bachelier a exécutés lui-même sur la toile en 1749, ne sont point de la peinture en cire et au feu telle que les Anciens la pratiquent, quoique M. Bachelier ait d'abord été dans ce préjugé, et que M. le comte de Caylus y soit peut-être encore<sup>17</sup>.

Rather than serving to rediscover what encaustic was, Caylus's historical claim sends Bachelier back to his initial experiments in 1749, but only to spur further research. Diderot painstakingly describes these and the discoveries they lead to, both by painter and by others who had caught the encaustic bug. In this respect, *L'histoire et le secret* is an exemplary text of just how the description of the arts in the *Encyclopédie* ought to spur the development of knowledge, comparable to articles such as "Chamoiseur", which asserts that "il suffit d'avoir décrit exactement un art tel qu'il se pratique dans un lieu, et tel qu'il se peut pratiquer partout<sup>18</sup>." As the above passage makes clear, for Diderot, description in language does not lead to historical rediscovery because a given artistic process such as painting in wax cannot become an object of historical representation. It is only *after* Bachelier learned of Caylus's claim to have rediscovered encaustic, Diderot insists, that he first identified his artistic experiments, but this identification does not lead to a substantive that one can refer to as "encaustic". In other words, one cannot first know an art through its representation in language and then perfect it. Caylus erred because he believed the name "encaustic" referred to an ideal that remained consistent and selfsame over time waiting to be rediscovered and recreated by "borrowing", to use Winckelmann's analogy once more, Pliny's "eyes".

In Diderot's account of Bachelier's experiments, then, an art develops precisely because it lacks an essence. It is an experimental process and its name is only ever a regulative idea, in Kantian terms, a heuristic fiction that refers to practices that exist ever only *under description*. As descriptions, arts are never complete, they are always partial and contingent in their historicity, a point Diderot makes in "Encyclopédie": "Qu'un homme consume une partie de sa vie à la *description des Arts*; que, dégoûté de cet ouvrage fatigant [...] il ne s'écoulera vingt ans

17 Diderot, Denis, *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, *op. cit.* p. 138-139.

18 *Encyclopédie*, vol. III, p. 74.

[...] il ne retrouvera que des notions incorrectes [...]”<sup>19</sup> Thus, even though Bachelier’s experiments led to him to real discoveries in the art of painting in wax, specifically the need to both substitute his wax mixture in place of the oil painters traditionally used and then burn the work to fix its image, what Diderot calls “*inustion*”, his painting in wax cannot be the same as ancient encaustic: “Si nous n’avons pas recouvert la peinture à la cire et au feu des Anciens, nous en possédons du moins une autre qui en approche beaucoup<sup>20</sup>.” Moreover, there can be no one-to-one identity between the description of the process and discovery. Accidents and intuitions drawing on other areas of knowledge play a crucial role, implying that artistic development, and thus its history, is necessarily discontinuous and non-linear. “Nous devons au hasard un grand nombre de connaissances”, writes Diderot in “Art<sup>21</sup>”.

*L’histoire et le secret* thus makes the case that painting in wax, and by extension art in general, is always unfinished, self-differing, and deferring, a *secret* always in need of rediscovery and publication, one of the *Encyclopédie*’s primary directives. According to Diderot, this was already understood by Pliny:

Il [Pliny] dit, liv. XXXV, ch. VI. Nous ne connaissons point celui qui pensa le premier à peindre avec des cires, et à bruler sa peinture [...] Il est certain que les Anciens ont eu deux sortes de peintures *encaustiques*; l’une en cire; l’autre en ivoire et au cestre, c’est-à-dire au burin [...] Il y a une troisième sorte de peinture *encaustique*, dans laquelle les cires fondues au feu, s’appliquent au pinceau<sup>22</sup>.

Pliny recognized, it would seem, that there is no single recipe or original of painting in wax. It is, rather, a historically discontinuous series of descriptions spurred by acts of naming such as the one attempted by Caylus in Madame Geoffrin’s salon: “*ceci est l’encaustique des anciens*”. It exists only ever as a fiction that one projects as *having been*, something that lays underneath, a *subiectum* or the subject of a proposition that one can point to as a transhistorical essence.

While *L’histoire et le secret* considers description in the context of the Encyclopedic transmission of knowledge, in Diderot’s writings on art, it is

19 *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 636A.

20 Diderot, Denis, *L’histoire et le secret de la peinture en cire*, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

21 *Encyclopédie*, vol. I, p. 715.

22 Diderot, Denis, *L’histoire et le secret de la peinture en cire*, *op. cit.*, p. 137-138.

theorized in regards to issues of taste, critical judgment, and the historicity of art. Yet rather than affirming literary sources as an ideal for the plastic arts, Diderot adopts an allegorical paradigm that operates in the absence of such an ideal. In this regard, his celebrated account of Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *Le Grand prêtre Corésus s'immole pour sauver Callirboé* in the *Salon de 1765*, is exemplary. It begins by insisting that he did not see the painting:

Il m'est impossible, mon ami, de vous entretenir de ce tableau; vous savez qu'il n'était plus au Salon, lorsque la sensation générale qu'il fit, m'y appela. C'est votre affaire d'en rendre compte; nous en causerons ensemble. [...] Mais pour remplir cet article Fragonard, je vais vous faire part d'une vision assez étrange dont je fus tourmenté<sup>23</sup>.

Instead of describing the painting that had won the Academy's prize that year, Diderot insists that he is describing a dream in which he found himself in Plato's cave. In this dream, he tells Melchior Grimm, his frequent interlocutor in the *Salons*, he saw the events described in the literary source of the painting, Pausanias's *Description of Greece*, leading up to the moment Fragonard chose to depict, the moment of highest drama in which a young priest named Coresus takes his own life upon learning that he must sacrifice his beloved.

In denying that he had seen the painting, Diderot insists on a difference between verbal description and pictorial representation and breaks the circuit between description and reference in acts of critical judgment. Instead, he delegates the task of comparing the events he describes in his *rêve* to the scene depicted in Fragonard's painting to "Grimm": "C'est votre affaire d'en rendre compte"<sup>24</sup>. In doing so, Diderot holds apart what critical judgment must bring together: a description of the visual work of art and a description of an ideal that can serve as a standard of taste. He divides these functions between "Diderot", who recounts the events drawn from Pausanias's *Description*, and "Grimm", who compares it to Fragonard's painting:

Grimm: Mais dites-moi, mon ami, n'avez-vous confié votre rêve à personne?  
Diderot: Non. Pourquoi me faites-vous cette question?

23 Diderot, Denis, *Salon de 1765*, édité par Else Marie Bukdahl et Annette Lorenceau, Paris, Hermann, 1984, p. 253.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 253. Melchior Grimm was the editor of the *Correspondance littéraire*, where Diderot published his *Salons*, and an avid collector of Greco-Roman antiquities.

Grimm: C'est que le temple que vous venez de décrire est exactement le lieu de la scène du tableau de Fragonard<sup>25</sup>.

Later in the dialogue, "Grimm" describes Fragonard's painting in detail while "Diderot" compares them to what he saw in his *rêve*:

Diderot: Mais l'instant effroyable de mon rêve, celui où le sacrificateur s'enfonce le poignard dans le sein, est donc celui que Fragonard a choisi?

Grimm: Assurément. Nous avons seulement observé dans le tableau que les vêtements du grand-prêtre tenaient un peu trop de ceux d'une femme.

Diderot: Attendez; mais c'est comme dans mon rêve<sup>26</sup>.

The roles have been reversed, but description and reference remain distinct. When "Diderot" is describing his dream, "Grimm" is referring it to Fragonard's painting; inversely, when "Grimm" is describing Fragonard's painting, "Diderot" is referring it to his *rêve*.

In this manner, the account of Fragonard in the *Salon de 1765* is an allegory that reveals that the Horatian analogy of the arts depends on a difference that description produces but cannot then close through analogy. Whether verbal or visual, description produces the ideal figure that judgment requires as a standard and places it in its anteriority in the "*antre de Platon*". This is true whether such an ideal is a literary figure such as Pausanias's narrative or an aesthetic and historical model such as the one Winckelmann believed he saw in Greek sculpture. In both cases, the analogy of the poet's "eyes" establishes the circuit between the verbal and the visual, but it is this analogy that Diderot refuses. Instead, as he argues throughout the *Salons*, the painter ought to select a moment prior to that of the highest moment of action. In the *Salon de 1761*, for example, speaking of Gabriel-François Doyen's *Combat de Diomède et d'Enée*, Diderot insists the painter ought to have resisted choosing the moment of highest tension as described by Homer in the *Iliad*: "J'aurai choisi, comme vous voyez, le moment qui eut précédé la blessure de Venus. M. Doyen au contraire a préféré le moment qui suit<sup>27</sup>." Fragonard had chosen to depict the wrong moment. He conceived painting in mimetic and referential terms, as imitation and *représentation*

25 Diderot, Denis, *Salon de 1765*, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 263.

27 Diderot, Denis, *Essais sur la peinture, Salons de 1759, 1761, 1763*, édité par Jacques Chouillet, Paris, Hermann, 1984, p. 152.

rather than as production and *presentation*. By contrast, “Diderot” describes multiple images from Pausanias’s story that come *before* the moment of highest drama, and “Grimm” responds: “[...] du train que vous rêvez, savez-vous qu’un seul de vos rêves suffirait pour une galerie entière<sup>28</sup>.”

The description of an ideal model is thus a task common to both the artist and the critic, yet neither can produce one that can serve as a standard for the other. The painter should describe a moment *before*, one that has never been described by the poet, rather than imitate the literary-historical moment of narrative action. These moments are anarcheological rather than analogical, theoretical rather than historical objects of literary or visual description. In the *Essais sur la peinture*, written as an addendum to the *Salon de 1765*, Diderot speaks of these as having “une nature poétique et idéale<sup>29</sup>.” In the *Salon de 1767*, this conception of anarcheological description implies that a visit to Rome or the direct viewing of its treasures are not necessary for developing one’s taste; the Salon exhibition and Diderot’s account of it are more than adequate substitutes for a *grand tour* of Italy:

Supposez-moi de retour d’un voyage d’Italie, et l’imagination pleine des chefs-d’œuvres que la peinture ancienne a produits dans cette contrée [...] Pour ce voyage d’Italie si souvent projeté, il ne se fera jamais. Jamais, mon ami, nous ne nous embrasserons dans cette demeure antique, silencieuse et sacrée [...] Écoute-moi, donc, car je vais tâcher de t’expliquer comment les Anciens, qui n’avaient pas d’antiques, s’y sont pris<sup>30</sup>.

Not only is Rome not the home of a historical standard of taste, the very condition of beauty is its nonexistence: “Convenez donc que, quand vous faites beau, vous ne faites rien de ce qui est, rien même de ce qui puisse être<sup>31</sup>.” Antiquity, Diderot states, lacked an antiquity of its own, that is, a model that it adopted as an ideal of imitation. The “poétique des ruines” that Diderot sets out in sections devoted to the paintings of Hubert Robert, Claude Vernet, and other artists are a direct consequence of beauty’s “nonexistence”. I cannot explore it adequately in the space that remains here. Instead, I would like to briefly consider

28 Diderot, Denis, *Salon de 1765*, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

29 Diderot, Denis, *Essais sur la peinture*, *op. cit.* p. 63.

30 Diderot, Denis, *Ruines et Paysages: Salon de 1767*. Édité par Else Marie Bukdahl, Michel Delon et Annette Lorenceau, Paris, Hermann, 1995, p. 55.

31 Diderot, Denis, *Ruines et Paysages*, *op. cit.*, p. 67-68.

how it informs Diderot's 1766 *Essais sur la peinture*, his most important theoretical writings on art, where, as Catriona Seth has remarked, it is already a question of the "poetics of ruins"<sup>32</sup>.

In fact, the absence of an antique *modèle idéal* drives the text's opening discussion of natural beauty. The *Essais* never mention Winckelmann by name, but they clearly aim at the priority he gives to the human body as an expression of ideal beauty and a symbol of nature's totality in the *History of the Art of Antiquity*: "La nature ne fait rien d'incorrect. Toute forme belle ou laide a sa cause, et de tous les êtres qui existent, il n'y en a pas un qui ne soit comme il doit être"<sup>33</sup>. As an archive of necessary relations, nature contains no ideal forms nor does it represent freedom in any sense of the term. Rather, the human body marks a clear distinction between art and nature: "Une figure humaine est un système trop composé pour que les suites d'une inconséquence insensible dans son principe ne jettent pas la production de l'art la plus parfaite à mille lieues de l'œuvre de la nature"<sup>34</sup>.

Diderot's refusal to identify art and nature should be read in the context of Winckelmann's understanding of Greek sculpture as the historical manifestation of natural beauty. Speaking of the *Belvedere Torso*, for example, he writes:

Nature was elevated by such concepts from the sensual to the eternal, and the hand of the artist produced physiques that were purged of human need. Figures that represent humanity in a higher state of worthiness appear to be merely the cloak and accouterments of rational spirits and heavenly powers<sup>35</sup>.

The refusal of the identity of art and nature, however, in the *Essais*, is restating in general, theoretical terms what Diderot had already said a year earlier in the *Salon de 1765*, specifically about Winckelmann's description of the *Belvedere Torso*, a version of which appeared in 1759 in the *Bibliothèque des belles-lettres et des arts libéraux* affirming that the

32 Seth, Catriona, « Le Goût des ruines » dans *The Dark Side of Diderot / Le Diderot des ombres*. Édité par James Hanrahan and Síoifra Perse. Oxford, Peter Lang, 2016, p. 115. See also my « Style and History in Diderot and Winckelmann, » dans James Corby, Ivan Callus, Gloria Lauri-Lucente (éds.), *Style in Theory: Between Literature and Philosophy*, Londres, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 71-90.

33 Diderot, Denis, *Essais sur la peinture*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

34 Diderot, Denis, *Essais sur la peinture*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

35 Winckelmann, Johann Joachim, *The History of the Art of Antiquity*, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

art work represented a “[beauté supérieure] sans limites et ne peuvent se dire qu’en une indivisible totalité”<sup>36</sup>:

Que ne voit-il [Winckelmann] dans ce tronçon d’homme qu’on appelle le *Torse*? Les muscles qui se gonflent sur sa poitrine, ce n’est rien moins que les ondulations de la mer [...]<sup>37</sup>

The critique of a natural ideal of antique beauty in the *Essais* comes, however, with an alternative account of the historical development of art that is legible in the very order of its presentation. Diderot reverses the genetic order of development in Winckelmann’s chapter on Greek art, which begins with the origin of ideal beauty in Greece’s natural climate and political freedom, followed by sections on the “essential” in art, its development and perfection in Greek sculpture, its technical aspects, and, finally, painting, followed by decline and ruin. Inversely, the *Essais* begin with the difference between art and nature that leads into an extended discussion of line, color, and chiaroscuro in painting. Next come sections devoted to expression and composition in which ancient sculpture is a main example, including the *Laocoön*. Notably absent, however, is a section or any mention of the “essential” in art. Instead, the discussion of the technical elements of painting leads to an assertion of the divergence between description in language and in visual art: “J’achève en une ligne ce que le peintre ébauche à peine en une semaine”<sup>38</sup>.

One might be tempted to think that in reversing Winckelmann’s order of presentation, Diderot intends to return to the origin of art in Greece’s natural beauty and its political freedom. In the last two sections, however, Diderot comes to architecture. In Winckelmann’s *History*, architecture is mentioned early in the chapter on Greek art, only to be set aside with the claim that it was the last of the arts to emerge because it is abstract and non-representational: “Sculpture and painting attained a degree of perfection among the Greeks earlier than did architecture. The last was more idealistic than the other two, because it could not be an imitation of something actual and, by necessity, had to be based

36 Winckelmann, Johann Joachim, « Le Torse de Belvedere » dans *De la Description*, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

37 Diderot, Denis, *Salon de 1765*, *op. cit.*, p. 277-278.

38 Diderot, Denis, *Salon de 1765*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

on general rules and laws of proportion<sup>39</sup>.” The German antiquarian sees symmetry and proportion as late developments that can only come after the emergence of an anthropomorphic ideal of natural beauty in sculpture and painting, that, in effect, imitate the symmetries of an ideal body. For Diderot, by contrast, architecture precedes the development of sculpture and painting: “[...] sans architecture, il n’y a point ni peinture ni sculpture, et que c’est à l’art qui n’a point de modèle subsistant sous le ciel que les deux arts imitateurs doivent leur origine et leur progrès<sup>40</sup>.” Further, not only does architecture precede the visual arts, it emerges in structures such as temples and triumphal arches:

Eh bien, mon ami, comptez que les temples et les chaumières et les dieux resteront dans cet état misérable [informe] jusqu’à ce qu’il arrive quelque grande calamité publique, une guerre, une famine, une peste, un vœu public, en conséquence duquel vous voyiez un arc de triomphe élevé au vainqueur, une grande fabrique de pierre consacrée au dieu<sup>41</sup>.

What distinguishes triumphal arches and temples from a Winckelmannian conception of Greek sculpture, for Diderot, is that they do not figure or represent a prior historical model or a natural totality. They represent neither heroes nor gods. They are not symbolic. Instead, they mark historical events without representing them. As such, they are figures of temporality. However, they also make possible the emergence of proportion and symmetry as relations between a structure and the human body: “D’abord l’arc de triomphe et le temple ne se feront remarquer que par la masse, et je ne crois pas que la statue qu’on y placera ait d’autre avantage sur l’ancienne que d’être plus grande. Pour plus grande, elle le sera certainement: car il faudra proportionner l’hôte à son nouveau domicile<sup>42</sup>.” Proportion emerges as an ideal relation only because architecture is radically disproportionate and unnatural. Instead, temples and arches assert a difference that first opens the possibility of historical representation and the representation of nature, but do so without establishing any fixed ideal or standard of taste for critical judgment, not even the judgment of architecture on

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39 Winckelmann, Johann Joachim, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, p. 190.

40 Diderot, Denis, *Essais sur la peinture, op. cit.*, p. 69.

41 *Ibid.*

42 Diderot, Denis, *Essais sur la peinture, op. cit.*, p. 70.

the basis of a relational ideal such as symmetry and proportion, since these, too, arise only after there is architecture. Diderot continues: “Mais si c’est l’architecture qui a donné naissance à la peinture et à la sculpture, c’est en revanche à ces deux arts que l’architecture doit sa grande perfection [...] Où aurait-il [l’architecte] pris le sentiment exquis des proportions<sup>43</sup>?” The difference between art and architecture implies that neither can become a standard for the other. Architecture gives rise to the possibility of reference, and thus represents the beginning of art, but it is not an origin that can be located geographically or identified politically in a country such as Greece. As a paradigm of Diderot’s anarcheology, architecture establishes the historicity of art, but without establishing an ideal model that can bind national identity or representation to natural beauty realized in art as does Winckelmann. In this sense, for Diderot, a temple or an arch is a museum, but a ruined one, a theoretical place, a fiction, that merely opens the possibility of artistic production. One thinks of Hubert Robert’s depiction of the Louvre in ruins in his 1796 *View of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre in Ruins* as a place where one comes to draw, that is, as an entirely unnatural locus of art where it goes to describe—and reinscribe—the fiction of the work of art. Whether Diderot discovered this idea in the paintings of Robert or whether Robert learned it from the *philosophe* is the subject of another study. Either way, however, Diderot envisions a museum not of the past but as the absence of a historical past as the condition of possibility of art. His anarcheological museum preserves the freedom of art and its historicity from the task or duty of historical reference, even an allegorical one, to a national identity and a political ideal. In doing so, it preserves the revolutionary possibility of freedom from the duty of Republican history.

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43 Diderot, Denis, *Essais sur la peinture, op. cit.*, p. 71.



FIG. 1 – Hubert Robert, *View of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre in Ruins*, 1796.  
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