Understanding Ingres

Background Notes

Dr Kathy McLauchlan — 3 May 2023

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Self-Portrait Aged 24,* 1804.
77 x 61cm. Musée Condé Chantilly.

Winchester Art History Group
www.wahg.org.uk

Jean-August-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867) is misunderstood by admirers and critics alike. This seminar seeks to explain the mismatch between Ingres's reputation and the realities of his work, with a focus on his achievements as a portrait painter.

Great combat between the Romantic and the Classic at the Entrance to the Museum, 1827. Lithograph, 25.6 x 21.5 cm. British Museum.

French 19th century art has often been understood in binary terms. In the cartoon above, Classicism and Romanticism are shown in mortal combat while an amused guard from the Louvre Museum looks on in amusement. 'Classicism' is the nude youth set alongside a miniature column. He raises his javelin against the sword of his enemy, the embodiment of 'Romanticism' - a bearded man dressed in Renaissance style with a gothic turret as his attribute. In his later years – the 1850s and 1860s - Ingres was firmly aligned with the classical tradition in French art, standing against the innovations of Romanticism. Contemporaries described him as a pillar of the French art establishment. He was, after all, a leading member of the Academy of Fine

Arts, and he had also by this time trained a generation of younger artists in the virtues of Classicism. Ingres was also fond of proclaiming himself a 'descendant' of Phidias and Raphael, and a defender of art's highest traditions at a time when they were increasingly under threat.

The primary source of this threat was the contemporary art market, centred around an exhibition that was notable for its mass appeal. This was the Salon, which in the first half of the 19th century was held in the Louvre every one or two years. The Salon was open to all. Any artist could submit his or her work for display, and the exhibition public was made up of both knowledgeable connoisseurs (the minority) and those who came for distraction and entertainment (the vast majority). François-Auguste Biard's painting of 1847 illustrates the Salon's popularity. It is 4pm, and the museum guards are calling time to a motley crowd whose reactions range between boredom, curiosity, and indifference. It is one of many paintings and prints from the period to signal the emergence of a new art public.

François-Auguste Biard, *Four O'Clock at the Salon,* 1847. 57.5 x 67.5 cm.
Louvre Museum.

Ingres was a self-declared enemy of this changing art world. "The Salon," he complained, "corrupts the sense of grandeur, of beauty: artists are induced to exhibit there by the appetite for gain, by the desire to get themselves noticed at any cost… the Salon is nothing more…than a picture shop, a bazaar…". These sentiments

reflected Ingres's own bitter experience at the hands of public and critics. At an early point in his career, several of his works had been mocked as 'bizarre' and 'Gothic'. Critics accused him of subverting the teachings of his master, Jacques-Louis David. They also claimed that he had turned his back on the greatest achievements of Antiquity and the High Renaissance to imitate the art of the Medieval and early Renaissance period. This was seen as a relatively 'primitive' stage in the development of western art, before masters like Raphael and Michelangelo achieved full mastery in the representation of space and form. Ingres's critics also attacked his portraits for perceived errors in proportion and anatomy. One reviewer at the Salon of 1834 attacked the 'monstrous' appearance of Ingres's *Portrait of Mme Jacques-Louis Leblanc*: "I cannot believe that this monster, lacking the upper part of her head, with orbicular eyes and sausage-like fingers, is not the distorted perspective of a doll, seen too close and reflected on the canvas by several curved mirrors…".

Ingres, *Mme Jacques-Lous Leblanc,* 1823. 119.4 x 92.7 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art (Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1918).

At the same exhibition one of Ingres' most ambitious history paintings, *The Martyrdom of St Symphorien* met with critical and popular disdain. The painting, which showed an obscure early Christian martyr just before his execution, was

mocked by critics and ignored by the public in favour of Delaroche's *Lady Jane Grey*. The latter, a painting full of drama and immediacy, attracted huge enthusiasm from the Salon public and from critics. The consensus was that Delaroche had brought his historical subject to life while Ingres's painting was cold and remote. For Ingres this judgement was grounded in ignorant popular taste. He wrote to his client, the Bishop of Autun, that *St Symphorien* had been presented at the Salon "to the criticism of a public miscellaneous in the extreme, with little sympathy for the beautiful, the grave, and all that is serious and respectable, I was obliged to endure the effects of envy,… ignorance, and bad faith….". Following this experience, Ingres decided to withdraw from the exhibition world, and the Salon public would have to wait over two decades for another major display of his work.

Ingres, *The Martyrdom of St Symphorien,* 1834. 407 x 389 cm. Cathédrale Saint-Lazare d'Autun.

Paul Delaroche, *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey,* 1833. 246 x 297cm. National Gallery, London.

Ingres's preference was for a more select and private clientele. Though even here he could not escape the demands of the 19th century art scene. He might dream of being a great history painter, devoting his time to grandiose scenes from history, mythology, and the Bible. But there was not much demand for history paintings among his private patrons, and Ingres as a chronic perfectionist in any case found it difficult to complete large-scale projects. To make a living he had to adapt his abilities

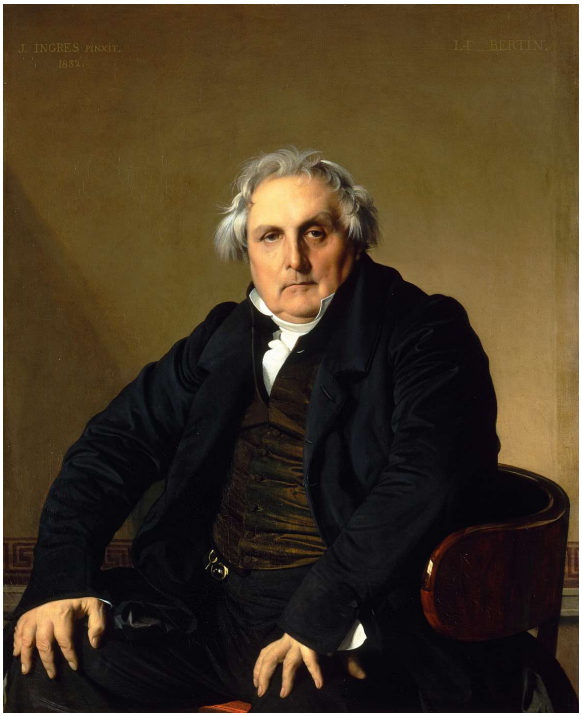
to his market, and this called for small-scale works suitable for domestic spaces – above all portraits. Portraiture was acknowledged to be one of the most prominent categories of art during the 19th century, and Ingres was one of many painters answering to the call.

Ingres remained uncomfortable with this reality throughout his career. He had been producing portraits from the start of the 19th century, when he was a student at the French Academy in Rome – many of them drawings of visiting tourists in the city. But he regarded portraiture as a lesser genre in art, incapable of capturing the ideal beauty he sought: "the history painter renders the type in general, while the portrait painter only represents the particular individual, and as a result a model which is often ordinary and full of faults". He resented the financial imperatives that diverted him from his true ambition – to win renown as France's leading history painter. Yet it was with portraiture that Ingres arguably achieved his greatest success. Over the course of his long career, he emerged as perhaps the greatest portrait painter of his age, setting standards that many imitated and none equalled. Even the works of his greatest student, Hippolyte Flandrin, can appear somewhat lifeless and 'flat' in comparison with examples by Ingres.

Hippolyte Flandrin, *Madame Hippolyte Flandrin,* 1846. 83 x 66 cm. Louvre Museum.

Ingres, P*ortrait of Comtesse d'Haussonville,* 1845. 131.8 x 91 cm. The Frick Collection, New York.

Ingres created images that are instantly recognisable as his. He became fascinated with the unique characteristics of individual sitters: "to succeed in [portraiture]", he noted, "one must consider at length the face one will paint, consider it from all sides and devote to it the last séance….". *Monsieur Bertin,* painted in 1832, may be cited as a portrait where Ingres followed his own guidance to the full. It was identified by many during and after Ingres's lifetime as his masterpiece. Depicting the editor of a leading political journal of the 1830s, the portrait was judged to be extraordinary both in its illusionism and in expressing the character of its sitter. To paraphrase the response of one contemporary reviewer, it 'walked and talked'. Here, and in his other great portraits, Ingres created iconic images which still shape our understanding of 19th century art and society.



Ingres, *Portrait of Monsieur Bertin,* 1832. 116 x 95 cm.
Louvre Museum.

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