

*1863: The Triumph of Naturalism*

*As early as 1863, Castagnary coined the term "naturalist" to distinguish the new generation of young painters from the older realists. Yet the major distinction was still to be drawn between the schools of the recent past—classicist and romantic—and the fresh creation of the present. Naturalism, from Castagnary's viewpoint, far from being a school with all the strictures and limitations this term implies, was simply a mode of liberation for the artist's vision and personality. In his Salon of 1868, Castagnary further defines naturalism and sets it in an historical context: all art directly confronting contemporary life and striving to reproduce the visual material of its time honestly has been naturalist. Castagnary, in insisting upon the relativity of beauty and the necessity for turning to all aspects of the visual world without preordained system, is indeed one of the prophets of nascent Impressionism.*

What is the object of painting?

"To express the Ideal," a choir of enthusiasts will cry, "to set forth the Beautiful."

Empty words!

The Ideal is not a revelation from on high, placed before an upward-striving humanity forever obliged to approach it without ever attaining it; the Ideal is the freely conceived product of each person's consciousness, placed in contrast with exterior realities; and thus it is an individual concept which varies from artist to artist.

The Beautiful is not a reality existing outside of man and imposing itself on his mind in the form or appearance of objects; the Beautiful is

<sup>37</sup> Théophile Thoré (W. Bürger, pseudonym), "Salon de 1863," *Salons de W. Bürger, 1861 à 1868*, pref. by T. Thoré (Paris: Librairie de Ve Jules Renouard, 1870), I, 411, 413-416.

an abstract abbreviation, beneath whose label we group a host of different phenomena that act upon our organs and intelligence in a certain way; thus, it is an individual or collective concept which varies, in a given society, from epoch to epoch, and, within an epoch, from man to man.

Let us get down to earth, where the truth is.

The object of painting is to express, according to the nature of the means at its disposal, the society which produced it. This is the way a mind free from the prejudices of education should conceive of it; this is the way the great masters of all times have understood and practiced it. Society is actually a moral being which does not know itself directly and which, in order to become conscious of its reality, needs to externalize itself, as the philosophers say, to put its potentialities in action and to see itself in the general view of their products. Each era knows itself only through the deeds it has accomplished: political deeds, literary deeds, scientific deeds, industrial deeds, artistic deeds, all of which bear the stamp of its own particular genius, carry the imprint of its particular character, and distinguish it at once from the previous era and the era to come. As a result, painting is not at all an abstract conception, elevated above history, a stranger to human vicissitudes, to the revolutions of ideas and customs; it is part of the social consciousness, a fragment of the mirror in which the generations each look at themselves in turn, and as such it must follow society step by step, in order to take note of its incessant transformations. Who would dare to say—given the fact that each civilization, and within each civilization, each era, has left behind its image on the canvas and revealed in passing the secret of its genius—that we shall not eventually have within the total extension of time all the successive aspects that humanity presents to art, and that the destiny of painting will not be fulfilled?