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Musei e mostre tra le due guerre

a cura di Silvia Cecchini e Patrizia Dragoni

Saggi

Painting the National Portrait. Retrospectives of Italian and French Art in the 1930's

Kate Kangaslahti*

Un portrait risque parfois de ressembler au
modèle, il ressemble toujours au peintre.

Paul Léon, *Exhibition of French Art 1932*, p. XIV

Nous avons tenté aussi notre portrait de la France.

Henri Focillon, *Chefs d'œuvre de l'art français
1937*, p. XIII

Abstract

In contrast to the museum, exhibitions, by virtue of their temporary nature, allow art to be mobilised in response to more immediate demands and, in the case of the travelling exhibition, export historical narratives of the nation abroad. This essays examines four

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exhibitions of French and Italian art which took place in the decade before the Second World War: two in London, the “Exhibition of Italian Art” in 1930 and the “Exhibition of French Art” in 1932; and two in Paris, “*L’Art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo*” in 1935 and the “*Chefs d’œuvre de l’art français*” in 1937. In comparing the shows – their organisation, contents, display and critical reception – my intention is to unpick the various political, art historical, even economic interests which sought to marshal art in these years. If the different faces these retrospectives presented were neither faithful nor scholarly reflections, in each case the evocation of a distant past was a mirror that reflected the divergent needs of the present.

Contrariamente ai musei, la natura temporanea delle esposizioni permette all’arte di essere spostata in risposta a domande più immediate e, nel caso di esposizioni itineranti, di esportare narrative storiche della nazione all’estero. Questo saggio esamina quattro esibizioni d’arte francese e italiana che si sono tenute nel decennio che ha preceduto la Seconda Guerra Mondiale: due a Londra, “L’esposizione d’arte Italiana” del 1930 e “L’esposizione d’arte francese” del 1932; due a Parigi, “L’arte italiana da Cimabue a Tiepolo” del 1935 e “Capolavori dell’arte francese” del 1937. Dal confronto delle suddette – la loro organizzazione, i contenuti, l’esposizione e la critica – la mia intenzione è di discernere i fattori politici, artistici, ed anche economici che hanno spinto a promuovere l’arte in questi anni. Se le varie sfaccettature che queste retrospettive hanno presentato non erano né fedeli e neppure riflessioni erudite, in ogni caso l’evocazione di un distante passato era uno specchio che rifletteva i divergenti bisogni del presente.

On 7 December 1936, the *directeur général des Beaux-Arts*, Georges Huisman, assembled a distinguished group of scholars, curators and cultural functionaries to discuss plans for a vast retrospective of French art. The exhibition was a late addition to the programme for the *Exposition internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne* in Paris the following year and the directive came from the Prime Minister, Léon Blum. The committee’s brief was two-fold: firstly, «to demonstrate the continuity of French art from its earliest beginnings»¹; secondly, «to show the public an ensemble of works of art, the likes of which [had] never before been seen»². Organised in admirable haste, the “*Chefs d’œuvre de l’art français*” (fig. 1) opened at the newly built Palais de Tokyo on 26 June 1937 and excited great fanfare. The 1.340 works on display collectively offered, in the words of the Minister for National Education and Fine Arts, Jean Zay, «a census of our national artistic riches»³, a wealth all the more apparent because none of the masterpieces were from the nation’s greatest repository, the Louvre. The various paintings, drawings, sculptures and tapestries were drawn from provincial and foreign museums, from private collections at home and abroad, representing some ten centuries of work that

¹ Paris, Archives Nationales, (henceforth AN), *Sous-série Beaux-Arts*, F/21/4082, organising committee meeting, 7 December 1936.

² AN *Sous-série Beaux-Arts*, F/21/4729, letter from Georges Huisman to André François-Poncet, French Ambassador to Germany, 5 February 1937.

³ *Chefs-d’œuvre de l’art français* 1937, p. VIII.

had come, Blum noted with pride, «from all corners of the globe to attest to the eternal prestige of French art»⁴. More than merely the sum of these magnificent parts, the incontestable glory of *le patrimoine* here stood as a likeness for *la patrie*. As the eminent French scholar Henri Focillon declared in his introduction to the catalogue, «we have attempted too our portrait of France»⁵.

Despite the lofty ambitions of the committee and the accolades which invariably greeted the display, the “*Chefs d’œuvre de l’art français*” was not an event without parallel or precedent. The art historian Louis Gillet attributed the speed with which organisers had assembled the show to their involvement in «the unforgettable exhibition at the Royal Academy»⁶ five years earlier, when they had served on France’s official delegation to the “Exhibition of French Art, 1200-1900” in 1932⁷. Putting this experience to good use, the same learned team had doubled its efforts to ensure that «Paris [was] equal to London, and the Quai de Tokyo [was] every bit as good as, if not better than, Burlington House»⁸. The exhibition of French art in London was itself one of a number of ambitious national retrospectives that had taken place at the Royal Academy, including the equally memorable “Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200-1900” in 1930. Then, precious works from many of Italy’s leading museums had graced the walls of Burlington House, to the delight of expectant crowds and the confident prediction of the English press that such an event would «not be robbed of its importance as a ‘gesture’ by repetition»⁹. Yet only five years passed before this first, spectacular manifestation of *italianità* was followed by a second, even greater display. In 1935, many more loans again arrived at the Petit Palais in Paris for “*L’Art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo*”, where this time the French public enjoyed the privilege of beholding «the eternal face of Italy»¹⁰.

Each of these never to be – but soon to be – repeated events, more than simply presenting a slice of French or Italian cultural heritage, rich though it was, were intended as embodiments of the national character. As scholars like Francis Haskell and Eric Michaud have shown, by the mid-nineteenth century European historians widely believed that the arts of a given society were the most reliable marker of its true complexion¹¹; as a corollary, burgeoning scholarship devoted to the history of art studied individual objects according to “styles”, styles that were determined along national lines¹². Other, now

⁴ Ivi, p. VI.

⁵ Ivi, p. XIII.

⁶ Gillet 1937, p. 274.

⁷ The various committees are listed in the respective catalogues. See *Exhibition of French Art, 1200-1900* 1932, pp. VI-XIII; and *Chefs-d’œuvre de l’art français* 1937, pp. XXVII-XXIX.

⁸ Gillet 1937, p. 274.

⁹ *Italian Art Exhibition* 1929, p. 12.

¹⁰ Ojetti 1935.

¹¹ Haskell 1993, p. 217.

¹² Michaud 2012, p. 69; Michaud 1996, p. 163. Donald Preziosi is more vehement in his

classic texts have discussed the concomitant development of new principles of display, in which artworks were grouped in museums by national schools and art-historical periods¹³. In newly public galleries, paintings and sculptures became actors in a performance of the nation's past¹⁴; no longer prized just for their rarity, such works were valued for the access they offered to something that normally could not be "seen", for the visibility they conferred upon the nation itself¹⁵. In France this assumption was given vivid expression in 1853 by Jules Michelet, the spiritual father for generations of French historians and art historians to come¹⁶. Recalling the defunct *musée des Monuments français*, he wrote that the «eternal continuity of the nation was reproduced there»; finally able to contemplate her arts, «France was at last able to see herself»¹⁷. Cultural heritage as a modern concept has always been the subject of an identity imperative, Dominique Poulot has long argued, precisely because it guarantees the representation of the nation, and in so doing, «incarnates a communal truth»¹⁸. By the early twentieth century the sense of ideological urgency that underpinned both the presentation of the nation's art and the study of its history was firmly entrenched throughout Europe and showed no signs of abate¹⁹.

Displayed in the museum in ways intended to communicate specific cultural meaning, art was instrumental in the construction of the nation as an «imagined community»²⁰. Yet in order for a museum's display to speak persuasively to its public, it could not be subject to impulsive change. The authority of a collection depended upon the consistency of its iconographic programme. Exhibitions, by virtue of their temporary nature, bridged this gap, making the order of things dynamic, as Tony Bennett writes, allowing art to be mobilised «strategically, in relation to more immediate ideological and political exigencies»²¹. As «a strategic system of representations [...] the will to influence», Bruce Ferguson likewise suggests, «is at the core of any exhibition». It is, however, these very

suggestion that the very "art" of art history is its fabrication of qualitative distinctions between societies. Preziosi 2003, p. 36.

¹³ Duncan, Wallach 1980; Karp, Lavine 1991; Pearce 1992; Hooper-Greenhill 1992; McClellan 1994.

¹⁴ Poulot 2012, p. 4.

¹⁵ Pomian 1994, p. 160; see also Kaplan 1994; Knell, Aronsson, Amundsen 2011.

¹⁶ For more on Michelet's romantic historiography and his personification of France through "her" arts, see Gossman 1996; see also the many texts in *Michelet: Inventaire critique des notions-clés*, special issue of the review «L'Esprit créateur», edited by Vivian Kogan in 2006.

¹⁷ Michelet 1853, Bk XII, ch. 7, p. 217.

¹⁸ Poulot 1997, p. 13; see also the essays by Stefan Berger, Tony Bennett, and Poulot in Aronsson, Elgenius 2014.

¹⁹ See, for example, Michela Passini's comparative historiography on the influence of nationalism in the development of art history as a discipline in France and Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Passini 2012.

²⁰ Anderson 1983.

²¹ Bennett 1995, p. 81.

systems of representation that are «available to investigation [...] or even exorcism»²². The scope of an exhibition, the individuals who stage it, their choice of objects and strategies of display, all speak to the various social, political, economic and art-historical forces that converge – and collide – in its makeup. This essay builds upon the scholarship of Haskell, Emily Braun, James Herbert and others, broadly reconstructing these four retrospective exhibitions of French and Italian art, comparing aspects of their organisation, contents, display and critical reception, in order to unpick the national and transnational interests that marshalled cultural heritage in the decade before the Second World War. As London challenged Paris for the title of Europe’s cultural capital, and Italy and France staked their rival claims as the torchbearers of European civilisation, in what ways were the shows interconnected, as sites of «transnational entanglements»²³? How were they devised for, presented to, and received by their different audiences, at home or abroad? As Paul Léon acknowledged in 1932, with rare sincerity and insight, «if a portrait sometimes risks resembling the model, it always resembles the painter»²⁴. The different faces these exhibitions presented were neither faithful nor even scholarly reflections, but in each case the evocation of a distant past was a mirror that reflected the divergent needs of the present.

1. *The “Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200-1900” at the Royal Academy in London in 1930*

The schema of large retrospective exhibitions, in which the works of a given country were presented as a key expression of its people and culture, came to the fore in Britain in the 1920’s. Francis Haskell has traced the origins of these events to the turn of the century when, in a period of heightened nationalism, the battleground between nations extended more and more to the cultural realm. In France as in Flanders, in Germany as in Italy, countries competed with one another to stage grandiose exhibitions devoted to their most famous artists or to groups of their early painters in order to demonstrate the glory and antiquity of their respective schools²⁵. An ambitious display of “*Les Primitifs flamands*” in Bruges in 1902 memorably asserted the foundational role of the Flemish school in the development of European painting²⁶. Two years later,

²² Ferguson 1996, p. 179.

²³ Meyer, Savoy 2014, p. 6.

²⁴ *Exhibition of French Art, 1200-1900* 1932, p. XIV.

²⁵ Haskell 2000, p. 100. See also Passini 2010b.

²⁶ See Haskell 1993, p. 461; and Hayum 2014.

Henri Bouchot mounted a strident reply in Paris²⁷: “*Les Primitifs français*” reclaimed a number of the same Flemish artists as French and expressly sought to counter the hypnotic «legend of an Italian “Renaissance”»²⁸ with the «true, human, and naturalist tendencies»²⁹ of French painting in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In the years before the First World War such shows took place in cities where there was an obvious connection; after 1918 exhibitions of a wider historical scope, but still equally strong national character, were exported. The first, an exhibition of Spanish paintings at the Royal Academy in London at the end of 1920, was not an unqualified critical success as the most impressive Old Master paintings were outnumbered by less popular, modern exhibits³⁰. The example it set, however, as an «act of national propaganda»³¹, attracted observers from afar, including the keen eye of the Italian journalist and art critic Ugo Ojetti, who had been closely involved in Italy’s wartime propaganda machine and the country’s efforts to safeguard its monuments and artworks during the conflict³². In weighing these two interests in 1920, in response to the Spanish show in London, he called upon cultural bureaucrats to relax their stringent custodial practices in order better to promote the nation’s cultural heritage abroad. Writing across two issues of the journal he edited, «Dedalo», Ojetti inveighed against the inactivity of civil servants, who, citing the risks posed by travel and lurking antique dealers, were denying Italy, queen of all arts, the right to be represented by her incomparable treasures. Appealing to a sense of both political and economic rivalry, he noted that the novels, paintings and elegance of Paris had promoted France and her various industries most effectively for more than a century, suggesting that «if beauty does not rule the world, it certainly helps»³³.

Despite Ojetti’s entreaties, it was only at the very end of 1929 that a shipload of some 300 Italian treasures left the port of Genoa bound for London, and they braved the perils of their journey and those ever furtive dealers at the initiative of the British. In the intervening years, the Royal Academy had hosted a further two, well-received exhibitions, one dedicated to Flemish and Belgian

²⁷ See Haskell 1993, p. 466; Lorentz, Martin, Thiébaud 2004; Morowitz 2005 p. 230; and Passini 2012, p. 83.

²⁸ Bouchot 1904, p. 6.

²⁹ Ivi, p. 10.

³⁰ “An Exhibition of Spanish Painting” at the Royal Academy, London, November 1920-January 1921. Haskell 2000, p. 108.

³¹ Ojetti 1921a.

³² On Ojetti’s various wartime activities, see Nezzo 2003a; Nezzo 2003b. Ojetti remained one of Italy’s most prominent and outspoken cultural figures during the interwar period. Through the exhibitions he staged, the columns he wrote for «Corriere della Serra», and the journals he founded and edited, «Dedalo» (1920) «Pègaso» (1929), and «Pan» (1933), he was to play an instrumental role in Fascism’s revival of Italy’s past, and the shaping of a new, national mythology. See Dotti 1982; De Lorenzi 2004; Canali 2008.

³³ Ojetti 1921b.

art in 1927³⁴, a second to Dutch art in 1929³⁵. Yet even as Rembrandt and Vermeer were still hanging on the walls of Burlington House, a letter in «The Times» written by the art collector Sir Robert Witt, chairman of the National Art Collections Fund, anticipated an Italian sequel the following winter³⁶. The public's enthusiastic response to the «revelations of the art of the north» had encouraged a number of influential people «to cast their eyes southward, beyond the Alps [...] [to] Italy [...] the cradle of the supreme art of painting»³⁷; an executive committee had already formed, of which Witt was a member³⁸. The Royal Academy itself was not behind initial plans for the exhibition. To the contrary, the «authorities» at Burlington House, as it was later reported, «adopted a most unhelpful attitude throughout»³⁹, demanding an exorbitant share of any profits, in addition to a sizeable weekly fee for the hire of the rooms⁴⁰. Events had actually been set in motion by the chair of the executive committee, Lady Chamberlain, an art lover, avid Italophile, and the wife of Britain's then Foreign Secretary, Sir Austen Chamberlain. She presided over a group which included Witt, the dealer Sir Joseph Duveen, the critic Roger Fry⁴¹, and even Kenneth Clark, future director of the National Gallery in London, then only an «untried youth [...] just returned from Florence»⁴². Ultimately, as he later recalled, «an exhibition of this kind is a policy decision made by busy and powerful men. They then find idle elderly men to form a committee, and take the credit. These then have to find someone to do the work»⁴³. With typical sardonic economy, Clark not only alluded here to his own role in proceedings, but also to the deciding political force behind the exhibition. From the outset Lady Chamberlain had solicited the support of Benito Mussolini, whom she

³⁴ «Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art, 1300-1900» at the Royal Academy, London, 8 January-5 March 1927.

³⁵ «Exhibition of Dutch Art, 1450-1900» at the Royal Academy, London, 4 January-9 March 1929.

³⁶ Witt 1929.

³⁷ *Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200-1900* 1930, p. X.

³⁸ The exhibition's executive committee had first met at the end of 1927. London, Royal Academy Archive (henceforth RA), RAA/SEC/8/42, minutes of the executive committee meeting, 19 December 1927.

³⁹ Mortimer 1930, p. 60.

⁴⁰ RA, RAA/SEC/8/42, letter from The Secretary to Robert Witt, dated 3 March 1928; and letter from Lady Chamberlain to the Secretary, dated 18 June 1929.

⁴¹ Fry was better known as a critic of modern art in Britain by this time, but during the course of the exhibition he returned to his origins as an Italian Renaissance scholar. On Fry, see Spalding 1980 and Elam 2003. For a speculative account of the influence of Fry's conceptualisation of «significant form» upon the display of works at Burlington House in 1930, see Borghi 2011.

⁴² Clark 1974, p. 177. For more on Clark's specific involvement in the exhibition see Cumming 2015. Clark's contribution to British cultural life was the subject of an exhibition at Tate Britain in London in 2015. See Stephens, Stonnard 2014; see also Secret 1984.

⁴³ *Ibidem*. The committees listed in the catalogue were, as Clark pointedly suggested, awash with the names of English and Italian dignitaries. See *Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200-1900*, pp. VI-XIX.

knew through her husband, and *Il Duce* threw his full and formidable weight behind the scheme.

When the highly anticipated “Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200-1900” opened at Burlington House on 1st January 1930, the Italian ambassador to Great Britain, Antonio Chiamonte Bordonaro, signalled Mussolini’s decisive role, emphasising that «without him not a single picture could have been taken out of Italy»⁴⁴. There was an unintended edge to his words. While Italy imposed some of the world’s strictest laws on the exportation of works of art, there were several owners and custodians who had tried to prevent their own slices of *patrimonio artistico* from leaving home soil⁴⁵. The pressure to loan works was considerable, as Ojetti’s once sleepy «*signori funzionarii*»⁴⁶ were roused from their slumber. Mussolini mobilised the country’s vast bureaucracy, leaving its provincial prefects in no doubt of the personal importance he attached to *la mostra*:

The Exhibition of Italian Art, due to open in January, constitutes an exceptional manifestation of *italianità*. I request Your Excellency to engage yourself personally, in the most effective possible manner, with owners, both institutional and private, to ensure that the works of art requested should be conceded, without any exception whatsoever [...] I count on their co-operation⁴⁷.

Mussolini’s unequivocal endorsement was typical of his idiosyncratic approach to diplomacy, at once pragmatic and propagandistic. Conscious of his problematic image abroad, still poor following the assassination of Giacomo Matteotti in 1924, it must have seemed politically expedient to continue to curry favour with the British Foreign Secretary by indulging his wife in the organisation of an exhibition sure to appeal to the British public⁴⁸. The crescendo of grateful anticipation that surrounded the arrival of Italy’s famed treasures in the British capital was cleverly depicted by Bernard Partridge in London’s *Punch* magazine (fig. 2). The Italian dictator appears in the guise of a fifteenth-century Medici patron, «Mussolini the Magnificent», graciously offering the Botticelli-like embodiment of Italian art to the deferential figure of «Giovanni Toro» – John Bull – who kneels before an open catalogue.

The British, as Partridge’s cartoon deftly illustrated, had long worshipped at the altar of Italian art and this enduring reverence unquestionably fuelled the public’s fervent expectations⁴⁹. Since the seventeenth century, first-hand study

⁴⁴ *The Italian Art Exhibition: Opening Dinner, Signor Mussolini’s Message* 1930.

⁴⁵ See Haskell 1999, pp. 463-465.

⁴⁶ Ojetti 1921b.

⁴⁷ Florence, Archivio delle Gallerie (henceforth AGF), circular to the prefect at the Comune di Prato, cited in Haskell 1999, p. 465.

⁴⁸ For more on Mussolini’s distinctive diplomacy see Burgwyn 1997, p. 27 and ff. On Austen’s ambivalent relationship with Mussolini during the 1920’s and the questions it raised in Britain at the time, see Edwards 1971. By the time the exhibition opened, Austen had resigned from his cabinet position and retired to the parliamentary backbench.

⁴⁹ John Hale’s pioneering historiography on the growth of English interest in the history of the

of the peninsular's history and culture had formed a rite of passage for the upper echelons of English society, as they embarked upon the Grand Tour⁵⁰. The show at the Royal Academy in 1930 enacted the same historical pilgrimage, but in reverse, and the artworks that subsequently travelled from the shores of the Mediterranean to the banks of the Thames reflected first and foremost the preferences of modern-day British devotees of Italian painting. While Ettore Modigliani, *soprintendente delle belle arti* of Lombardy and director of the Pinacoteca di Brera, ably served as the exhibition's commissioner general, his role was to cater to the choices of the British executive committee, about which he voiced deep misgivings. «They have included rubbish unworthy of an exhibition of this kind and omitted other first class and particularly interesting works that would not be difficult for me to obtain»⁵¹. Modigliani had also originally hoped the exhibition would be entirely composed of loans from Italy, the better to show the English «that although Italy ha[d] been robbed and looted for centuries, she still remain[ed] a great lady when opening up her own treasure chest»⁵². The committee's contrary goal was to make the display «as international as possible»⁵³ and to include works from all over Europe and even the United States. Furthermore, while the scope of the exhibition was initially fixed to paintings, drawings and a few sculptures from 1200-1800, the loans from Italy and elsewhere spoke to a more limited view of Italian art, one dominated by the scholarship of Bernard Berenson, in which the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries prevailed and Venetian painting occupied a place of privilege as «the most complete expression» of the Renaissance⁵⁴. Echoing Berenson, Roger Fry wrote in the commemorative catalogue that «nothing else in the history of art compared to Venice's rejuvenating power»⁵⁵. From the early days of Jacobello del Fiore, through the splendours of Titian, Giorgione, and Tintoretto, to the last flames of Tiepolo, Venice, agreed another critic, offered «four centuries of unparalleled achievement»⁵⁶.

Italian Renaissance, first published in 1954, remains the authoritative account on this subject. See Hale 2005.

⁵⁰ On the Grand Tour see Wilton, Bignamini 1996; Black 2003; Sweet 2012.

⁵¹ Letter from Modigliani to an unnamed correspondent, dated 6 April 1929, cited in Haskell 1999, p. 464.

⁵² Letter from Modigliani to the Italian Ambassador to Great Britain, dated 1 September 1927, cited in Haskell 1999, p. 463.

⁵³ *Exhibition of Italian Art. Date fixed for 1930* 1929.

⁵⁴ Berenson 1894, p. VII. Berenson's four influential volumes, *The Venetian Painters of the Renaissance* (1894), *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (1896), *The Central Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (1897), and *The North Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (1907), were republished together as *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance* by Oxford University Press in the winter of 1930, after the exhibition at the Royal Academy. On Berenson, see Samuels 1979; see also Clark 1960.

⁵⁵ Baniel, Clark 1931, vol. 1, p. XXVI.

⁵⁶ Brinton 1930, p. 185.

In deciding upon the display of the bounty entrusted to them, the committee, Witt acknowledged, had chosen to follow the claims of chronology above those of locality (fig. 3)⁵⁷. In the very first room, the lingering, Byzantine allure of early Venetian masters like Lorenzo Veneziano and Michele Giambono were interspersed among other Trecento and early Quattrocento treasures from Siena, Florence, Pisa, Rimini, and Verona. It was a small selection, due in part to the rarity and fragility of early works, but also a local indifference. «There is something a little suspicious about an extreme enthusiasm for the primitives», suggested one critic at the time. «They are to a large extent experts' delights and the legitimate prey of attribution hunters»⁵⁸. Viewers caught their first glimpse of the fifteenth-century Florentine masters in the second gallery, but the most popularly recognisable works, such as Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and Piero della Francesca's twin portraits of the Duke and Duchess of Urbino, appeared in the third room. The largest space in Burlington house showcased the most breathtaking quattrocento and cinquecento jewels that Italy had lent from its treasure chest. There were seven paintings by Andrea Mantegna, notably *Dead Christ* and *St George*, and eight works by Raphael, including *Head of an Angel* and *Christ Blessing* from Brescia's Pinacoteca. Giovanni Bellini's *Transfiguration* and Paris Bordone's *The Venetian Lovers* appeared alongside Giorgione's *The Trial of Moses* and *The Tempest*, playing to the local taste for Venetian painting. There were no less than eleven Titians, such as *The Baptism of Christ*, *Salomé*, and *The Vendramin Family*, finally lent, after much hand-wringing, by London's own National Gallery⁵⁹. In defiance of the stated chronology, Tiepolo's *The Finding of Moses* also hung in this room, happily reunited with *A Halberdier* (fig. 4), «the piece some vandal cut off it», offering the public a unique opportunity to see «the enormous superiority of his original composition»⁶⁰. By sheer virtue of their numbers, and, in some instances the size of their panels and canvases, Venetian artists were predominant.

The selection of works in galleries 6 and 7 went on to illustrate the role that landscape assumed in Venetian painting, the sympathy for nature that, according to Fry, prolonged the fertility of its school⁶¹. Among further, verdant works by Giorgione and Titian, visitors encountered the energetic painting style of “*il furioso*”, Jacopo Tintoretto. Ten of the artist's luxuriant canvases, including *The Deposition* and *Adam and Eve*, hung in close proximity to others by Palma Vecchio and Paolo Veronese. The hanging committee then suspended the usual sequence of paintings. In past shows works on paper had been relegated to the south rooms, but here drawings were allocated prime space in galleries 8 and 9.

⁵⁷ *Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200-1900*, p. XII.

⁵⁸ Earp 1930, p. 415.

⁵⁹ Haskell details the hostile negotiations which took place over this work. Haskell 1999, p. 466 ff.

⁶⁰ Mortimer 1932, p. 61.

⁶¹ Baniel, Clark 1931, p. XXVI.

The change was intended to reflect, as Witt wrote in the catalogue, the essential importance of drawings in «revealing the processes, mental and technical alike, of the master painters of Italy [...] studies through which the artist felt and fought his way from the first glimpse to the final vision»⁶². The place of privilege was perhaps also due to the fact that only here, in this «series of masterpieces of unparalleled quality»⁶³, did the work of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci appear. Kenneth Clark, who was cataloguing da Vinci's drawings in the royal collections at Windsor Castle at the time, went so far as to write that the «magnificent wall of drawings by Leonardo [was] the most completely satisfactory part of the whole exhibition»⁶⁴. The sense of intimacy and hidden discovery that the display conveyed also appealed, by many accounts, to the wider public. «Never before», remarked another critic, «have we seen visitors as interested and enthusiastic as they were before the pages that offered them a glimpse of the workshops of the Italian masters half-a-millennium ago»⁶⁵.

The interruption, however warmly welcomed, served to reinforce the sense that the main attraction was over. If the painting of the Seicento was undergoing a revival in Italy, this was not yet the case in Britain, and while Witt admitted it may have been «time to throw a more sympathetic glance upon the indisputable skill of [...] the Bolognese eclectics»⁶⁶, the small, indifferent selection of works in gallery 10 by Annibale Carracci, Guido Reni, Domenichino, Guercino and Caravaggio did little to advance the cause of the Baroque. «The later Italians», suggested Sir Charles Holmes, «do not show to conspicuous advantage, the Venetians excepted»⁶⁷. Tiepolo and his contemporaries, Francesco Guardi and Canaletto, were appreciably better represented in gallery 11 and the Architectural Room. According to the renowned Italian scholar Adolfo Venturi, who wrote the main catalogue essay, these artists not only «manifested some of the old Italian greatness», but, «in depicting the life of their own time, [and] in painting with swift, light touches»⁶⁸, they heralded the start of “modern” painting. The “modernity” of the eighteenth century Venetian painters was not a radical or even unfamiliar proposition to the British public. Berenson had similarly argued that Guardi and Canaletto, in their «eye for the picturesque and for [...] instantaneous effects», had anticipated «both the Romantic and Impressionist

⁶² *Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200-1900*, p. XII. Well before the exhibition opened «The Times» had announced that, due to their importance, drawings were to occupy two rooms. See *Italian Art: Burlington House Exhibition 1929*.

⁶³ *Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200-1900*, p. XIII.

⁶⁴ Clark 1930, p. 181.

⁶⁵ Mayer 1930, p. 218. Photographs of Da Vinci's cartoon of *The Virgin with St Anne* outsold all other reproductions at the exhibition, although it could be seen all-year-round in the Diploma Gallery of the Royal Academy. See *The Last of the Italian Pictures 1930*.

⁶⁶ *Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200-1900*, p. XIV.

⁶⁷ Holmes 1930, p. 71.

⁶⁸ *Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200-1900*, p. XXVI.

painters of our own century»⁶⁹; Tiepolo likewise, in his «feeling for splendour, for movement, and for colour [...] gave a new impulse to art», inspiring the revival of painting in Spain under Goya and in turn influencing «the best French artists of our time»⁷⁰. In the hands of Venturi, however, the author of the *Storia dell'arte italiana* and the putative “father” of modern Italian art history, this critical stance acquired a new, national significance⁷¹.

Venturi's contribution, which began with Bonaventura Berlinghieri's *St Francis* of 1235 and culminated in eighteenth-century Venice, was still implicitly, rather than explicitly, chauvinistic, in that it sustained an interpretation of art history limited to Italian artists and their works and was written by an Italian scholar. In contrast, Ugo Ojetti's contribution to the catalogue, devoted to *Italian Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, was more militantly nationalistic. Throughout the 1920's, both in his published criticism and in exhibitions he mounted in Italy, Ojetti had been striving to create a new narrative for Italian art, a self-referential pictorial lineage «without gaps», free from the scourge of foreign influences, that extended through the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries⁷². British organisers of the 1930 show had initially decided against venturing beyond 1800 for fear «of what [they] might be asked to take»⁷³, but, in a political concession, eventually acquiesced to wish of their guests. In the last display in the Lecture Room of Burlington House, Ojetti sought to prove to the English public that once Italy's painters threw off the cold neoclassicism imposed under foreign occupation in the early nineteenth century they resumed their dialogue with the past, forging a modern movement that was at once uniquely Italian and equal to any in Europe. A new Florentine school had emerged in the second half of the century, Ojetti suggested in his text, painters whose studies of nature and genre scenes, created by means of «*macchia*, or spots of unmixed colour»⁷⁴, bore no relationship to contemporary French naturalism⁷⁵. Following in the wake of their Venetian forebears in previous rooms, artists such as Telemaco Signori, Giovanni Fattori and Silvestro Lega were exhibited as the «rebirth»⁷⁶ of eighteenth-century Italian painting, heirs to the gift for swift, light touches that Venturi had described in the same

⁶⁹ Berenson 1894, p. 75.

⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 76.

⁷¹ For more on Venturi's role in the development of art history in Italy, including his relationship to Berenson, see Agosti 1996; Iamurri 2009; and Iamurri 2012.

⁷² Miraglio 2011, p. 64. Two years before the exhibition at the Royal Academy in London, Ojetti's efforts had culminated in the “*Mostra della Pittura Italiana dell'Ottocento*” at the Venice Biennale of 1928, followed by the publication in 1929 of *La pittura italiana dell'Ottocento*.

⁷³ RA, RAA/SEC/8/42, Letter from Sir Frank Dicksee to Lady Chamberlain, 22 November 1927.

⁷⁴ *Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200-1900* 1930, p. XXIX.

⁷⁵ For more on Italian attempts during the Fascist period to refute the influence of French nineteenth-century painting, above all Impressionism, by asserting the originality of the *Macchiaioli*, see Picconi 2013.

⁷⁶ *Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200-1900* 1930, p. XVIII.

pages. These «*Macchiaioli*» forged the path for Vittore Grubicy and Giovanni Segantini, whose later divisionism Ojetti attempted to sell as a «fortunate counterpart»⁷⁷ to, or even the predecessor of, French Neoimpressionism. English critics, when they acknowledged the display, were rarely kind. With the exception of Michele Cammarano's *Piazza San Marco*, the modern room was, wrote one, «deplorable»⁷⁸; another wondered what had possessed so proud a people to advertise the degeneration of its art⁷⁹. Ojetti found a more receptive audience at home where, in these glories of the recent and distant past, «*Corriere della Serra*» found proof of Italy's modern revival: «The exhibition at Burlington House is a portentous sign of the eternal vitality of the Italian race, which has enabled it to be always and everywhere in the vanguard, leaving others only the freedom to imitate»⁸⁰.

Self-congratulation was not the preserve of the Italian Press. In introducing the exhibition Witt had marvelled that, «for the third time in the last four years, London [...] is the Mecca of art-lovers the world over»⁸¹. The show, most British commentators agreed, had set a new standard of artistic excellence; by the time it closed on 22 March, after a two-week extension, it had attracted some 540.000 visitors and the British public had been a superb host to these many «exceptional guests»⁸². The journey of these masterpieces, it was widely acknowledged, had not been without risk, but just as art could become invisible through familiarity, Roger Fry suggested, so it could be nourished by new situations, reuniting works separated over centuries and throwing valuable critical light on attributions. The physical confrontation of *Portrait of a Young Lady* from Milan's Poldi Pezzoli with a second profile from the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin, for example, convinced Fry that both works were by Piero del Pollaiuolo⁸³. T.W. Earp and Sir Charles Holmes, the former director of London's National Gallery, used their reviews as an opportunity for more patriotic comparisons, and directed readers' attention to the strength of Britain's own collections⁸⁴. This, however, also provided pause for thought, for whereas the National Gallery had only reluctantly lent Titian's *The Vendramin Family* to the exhibition, and was prohibited by law from sending works overseas, foreign institutions had been generous. Was there not, Sir Austen Chamberlain wondered, a lesson here for Englishmen⁸⁵? Witt, in the catalogue, even cited

⁷⁷ Ivi, p. XXX.

⁷⁸ Earp 1930, p. 415.

⁷⁹ Mortimer 1930, p. 60.

⁸⁰ *A Gratified Italian Press* 1930.

⁸¹ *Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200-1900* 1930, p. X.

⁸² *English Art for Rome* 1930.

⁸³ Fry 1930, pp. 130-135.

⁸⁴ Earp 1930; and Holmes 1930.

⁸⁵ Remarks made during a speech given at a dinner by the executive committee to celebrate the opening of the exhibition and reported in «The Times». *The Italian Art Exhibition: Opening Dinner, Signor Mussolini's Message* 1930.

Part I of the Final report of the Royal Commission on National Museums and Galleries, published in September 1929: «a nation which welcomes great international exhibitions to its capital and fails to reciprocate cannot escape from the charge of churlishness»⁸⁶. It was not, however, simply a question of lending works, but also of promoting Britain's own national school abroad. «In sending, in a special meaning, herself, Italy has given us a clearer sense of how we should respond: alike we need to send ourselves, in our great portrait and landscape painters»⁸⁷. Despite diplomatic suggestions of a corresponding exhibition of English art in Rome, the British, for the moment, were destined to remain hosts, not guests⁸⁸.

Reviews that appeared in specialist publications outside either England or Italy more clearly addressed the exhibition proper. In the German periodical «Pantheon», August Mayer, chief curator of Munich's Alte Pinakothek, stressed the nature of the exhibition as a crowd-pleaser, suggesting that, in comparison to earlier presentations of Flemish and Dutch art, it offered the art historian little by way of new insights, attributions or reference materials⁸⁹. Hans Mackowsky in «Der Cicerone» critiqued a display that was neither strictly chronological nor by school, and lamented the large space uselessly allocated to the nineteenth century when the Baroque masters, by comparison, received so little consideration⁹⁰. André Duboscq also queried arrangements in «La Revue de l'art», suggesting that in choosing to exhibit such a large number of paintings organisers had failed to show many of those works to their best advantage. He also took pains to remind his readers that while the exhibition was not the first the British had organised, such events, «as everyone knows», originated in France at the Musée du Jeu de Paume⁹¹. France's competing claim to the title of cultural trailblazer emerged in more ways than one during the course of the exhibition. It undoubtedly informed Ojetti's push to include nineteenth-century examples in the display as evidence of the vitality of Italian art. When English critics sought to assert the contemporary relevance of Italy's artistic past, however, they preferred to draw comparisons with modern French painting: the *Virgin and Child* attributed to Cimabue recalled Henri Matisse, in the extreme beauty of its colour scheme; the foreground of Antonio del Pollaiuolo's *The Rape of Deianira* illustrated an Impressionist technique bewildering in a quattrocento painting; Bramantino's *Ecco Home* could be mistaken for «the

⁸⁶ *Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200-1900* 1930, p. xv.

⁸⁷ *The Last of the Italian Pictures* 1930.

⁸⁸ *English Art for Rome* 1930.

⁸⁹ Mayer 1930, p. 214.

⁹⁰ Mackowsky 1930, p. 104.

⁹¹ Duboscq 1930, p. 92. Most of the shows to which Duboscq was referring took place after the Jeu de Paume was designated the Musée des écoles étrangères in 1922, and while an exhibition of Dutch art had also taken place there in April and May 1921, it still followed the exhibition of Spanish painting at the Royal Academy in 1920. Such displays in Paris were also invariably much smaller than those at the Royal Academy, so his claim is tenuous.

work of some very up-to-date Parisian»⁹². Raymond Mortimer addressed the countries' rivalrous claims directly when he assured his readers that «not even in nineteenth-century France has the stream of great painting run so strongly as it did in Italy from the time of Giotto to that of Bronzino»⁹³. The next national retrospective at the Royal Academy in 1932 was to present the British public with the opportunity to test that very proposition.

2. The "Exhibition of French Art, 1200-1900" at the Royal Academy in London in 1932

The president of the Royal Academy, Sir William Llewellyn, who had often proved a thorn in Lady Chamberlain's side, more amicably negotiated preparations for the "Exhibition of French Art" in London in January 1932; the problems this time were on the French side. Planning was overseen by the *Association française d'expansion et des échanges artistique* (AFEEA), the agency founded in 1922 to facilitate better collaboration between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, together responsible for exhibits of French art abroad, but often uncooperative in the planning of events. London proved no different. France's Ambassador to Great Britain, Aimé-Joseph de Fleuriau, wrote repeatedly to the French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand regarding the obstruction of loans, emphasising that, «given the strength of both public and private collections in England, it would be useless, harmful even, to send to London works that were not of the first order»⁹⁴. Careful to manage expectations, he did not anticipate a French triumph equivalent to the extraordinary success of *la mostra* in 1930, but used its salient example: it was due to the unconditional support of the Italian government that London had been able to exhibit masterpieces from municipal and state collections never before seen outside Italy. The Quai d'Orsay was aware of the burden of comparison France faced, and of the imperative to organise an exhibition of the same distinction as the Dutch, Flemish, and Italian displays⁹⁵. It confronted the clear reluctance of *Beaux-Arts fonctionnaires*, who denounced such overseas shows as contrary to efforts in favour of French tourism and the conservation of the nation's artistic heritage. The words of the *sous-secrétaire d'État des Beaux-Arts*, reported at the time, reflected his

⁹² Mortimer 1930, pp. 60-61.

⁹³ Ivi, p. 68.

⁹⁴ AN, *Sous-série Beaux-Arts*, F/21/4739, letter from Aimé-Joseph de Fleuriau to Aristide Briand, 14 March 1929. He repeated the sentiment in a second letter, 24 February 1930.

⁹⁵ Ivi, letter from the *Ministre des Affaires étrangères* to the *Sous-secrétaire d'État des Beaux-Arts*, 5 March 1930.

administration's attitude: «If the English wish to see our pictures they have only to come over here»⁹⁶.

The objections that French cultural administrators voiced were similar to those Mussolini had simply overridden: moving works always presented risks; the costs were prohibitive; the public disliked seeing its collections stripped, even temporarily, of their prized possessions⁹⁷. More particularly, since the law forbade British museums from lending artworks overseas France would be ill-advised to send anything of its own across the Channel. When it looked like plans were all but sunk, Waldemar George, founding editor of «Formes» and one of the more complicated cultural figures of the interwar period, penned a clear rebuke in the pages of his review⁹⁸. Under the title *Le Gouvernement de la France contre l'art français*, he decried the loss of the chance «to situate French art in relation to European art, to consider the problem of our primitive painters, to shed light on, to define the term “French painting”, to create the notion of an art indisputably French»⁹⁹, subjects George had long been deliberating in his own criticism¹⁰⁰. «The Exhibition in London», he lamented, «would have consecrated the artistic primacy of France in the eyes of the world»¹⁰¹. He also regretted that, in comparison to the inspiring spectacle the Italians had offered of «a whole nation united in its understanding of the Kingdom's artistic interests», the work of French organisers had not elicited the unanimous support it merited as a valuable exercise in «French propaganda»¹⁰². The show, while it went ahead, never completely overcame this initial scepticism, ill will and obstruction. On the eve of its opening, the art historian Germain Bazin observed that organisers had been forced to rely on foreign collections and that while the Louvre was sending some 170 pieces, many other French institutions had not shown a like largesse. He accused provincial collections in Nantes, Aix, and particularly Avignon, which had possessively clung to Enguerrand Quarton's *Coronation of the Virgin*, of depriving the exhibition of an entire aspect of French painting, its primitives¹⁰³. «Deaf to every proposal, inaccessible to every argument», some museums refused to lend even one work. Valenciennes, Marseilles, and above all Saint-Lô, which had withheld one of

⁹⁶ George 1931a.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁸ George's critical trajectory, or rather puzzling *volte face*, has been well documented, from staunch advocate of Parisian modernism in the early 1920's, to one of its most vehement critics by 1931 and, eventually, apologist for Italian Fascism. See Golan 1995; Affron 1997; Chevrefils Desbiolles 2008; Wierzbicka 2010; and Fraixe 2014b. On the editorial direction he pursued in «Formes», see Chevrefils Desbiolles 2014, especially pp. 177-180.

⁹⁹ George 1931a (my emphasis).

¹⁰⁰ For more on the way in which George specifically used the advent of the exhibition at the Royal Academy to synthesise his own critical positions on the nature of French art, see Iamurri 2002.

¹⁰¹ George 1931a.

¹⁰² *L'Exposition d'Art français à Londres* 1931, p. 144.

¹⁰³ Bazin 1931, p. 164; see also Guenne 1932, p. 45.

the greatest works of the French school, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot's *Homère et les bergers*, also found themselves on Bazin's «black list» for their failure «to recognise their most primordial national duty»¹⁰⁴.

For Georges and Bazin, the patriotic duty of those responsible for France's public collections was determined here not by the need to preserve the country's cultural heritage, but the art-historical-cum-national imperative to promote it, and, more importantly, write its story. The history of French art within France had proved divisive in the past, characterised throughout the nineteenth century by what Edmond Bonnaffé dubbed in 1875 as the enduring battle between «*les pontifes de l'antiquité et les paladins du moyen âge*»¹⁰⁵. The “pontiffs” celebrated France's delivery from gothic barbarism under the reign of François I^{er}, following the introduction of classical art and culture from Italy; conversely, the “paladins” associated the arrival of Italian artists at Fontainebleu in the sixteenth century with the corruption of French painting by an already decadent tradition¹⁰⁶. Louis Courajod notably fuelled the polemic in a series of lectures he gave at the École du Louvre between 1887 and 1896, in which he directly challenged Italy's status as the well-spring of European art, linking the origins of modern painting not to the rediscovery of Antiquity but to the principle of observation and the imitation of nature. According to Courajod, the true Renaissance blossomed in France in the thirteenth and fourteen centuries, in the naturalist tendencies of Franco-Flemish artists working in the French court¹⁰⁷. Henri Bouchot closely reprised Courajod's thesis in staging “*Les Primitifs français*” in Paris in 1904, a display that in turn provoked the ire of classicists such as the arch-conservative Louis Dimier, who had long deplored what he saw as the «modern [French] mania to denigrate [Italy]»¹⁰⁸. Different ideological positions had both crystallised and polarised at the turn of the twentieth-century in the intellectual fallout of the Dreyfus affair, when, as James Herbert discusses, art-historical preferences «served as the scantiest cover for raging political controversy»¹⁰⁹. Some thirty years later, however, for a new generation of historians and critics who sought to retrace a more

¹⁰⁴ Bazin 1931, p. 164.

¹⁰⁵ Bonnaffé 1875, p. 394.

¹⁰⁶ This ongoing scholarly debate has been well documented. See for example, Schnapper 1994; Zerner 1996; Bresc-Bautier 2008; Passini 2008.

¹⁰⁷ Courajod 1901. On Courajod see Vaisse 2008; Passini 2012, pp. 11-26.

¹⁰⁸ Letter from Louis Dimier to Eugène Müntz, dated 20 May 1900. Cited in Passini 2010a, p. 211. On Dimier's response to Bouchot's exhibition, see Passini 2012, pp. 93-99.

¹⁰⁹ Herbert 1998, p. 92. Herbert observes that, in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair, reactionary commentators championed the classicism of Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorraine and their model of *la grande tradition* as emblematic of the nation's cultural and political ascendancy in the seventeenth century, under the absolutist state of Louis XIV. Conversely, liberal or Republican authors countered this canon by emphasising the importance of eighteenth century and those artists who bore a filiation to the later Impressionist painters and the realist masters of the Dutch Republic.

reconciliatory genealogy of French art, the exhibition at Burlington House in 1932 represented a pivotal moment.

In anticipation of the event, George prepared a special issue of «Formes», collating thematic pieces reflecting upon *Le portrait français*, *Les Primitifs français*, *La tenue classique de l'art français*, and *Le dessin français*, and inviting a number of prominent French and foreign experts to contribute to a debate on French art considered as «a cultural unit»¹¹⁰. Several distinct, but concomitant ideas emerged from the many responses to this *Enquête sur l'art français*¹¹¹. Firstly, the French School demonstrated, according to W. G. Constable, director of the newly founded Courtauld Institute of Art, «a well-marked unity, both in underlying spirit and in technical character»¹¹²; it mirrored, wrote the Viennese scholar, Hans Tietze, the national unity France had attained earlier, and more completely, than her European neighbours and especially Germany¹¹³. Secondly, French painting, historically and geographically, lay at the confluence of two strong artistic currents, one from Flanders and the Netherlands, the other from Italy¹¹⁴. It sat, explained René Huyghe, curator at the Louvre, at the «aesthetic crossroads of Europe», where the spiritual ideals of «Mediterranean classicism» met a Northern art «engrossed in the material world»¹¹⁵. French art was the natural intercessor between North and South, suggested Herman Voss, because France, «in painting as in other respects, [was] the enemy of all extremes»¹¹⁶. «Measure, clarity and grace», agreed the Belgian art historian, Paul Fierens, but these qualities were not to be confused with stasis, or the impossibility of development, because «great Frenchman resist and they react»¹¹⁷. The French artist was, as Huyghe's colleague, Paul Jamot emphasised, «an individualist [...] little fitted for collective effort, but apt for personal creation»¹¹⁸. In a stand-alone volume penned in conjunction with the upcoming exhibition, George further elaborated upon *L'Esprit français et la peinture française* and his own thoughts closely reflected the «findings» of the *enquête* he had launched in «Formes»: «French art represents unity in time [...] a point of intersection between the South and the North, it is a subtle blend of

¹¹⁰ *Enquête sur l'art français* 1931. This issue typifies George's overall editorial approach in «Formes», what Yves Chevretil Desbiolles has identified as the critic's rejection of the modern Parisian scene, and above all its foreign painters, in favour of a more conservative, specifically French, national tradition. See Chevretil Desbiolles 2014, p. 179.

¹¹¹ For more on this enquiry into French art, see also Iamurri 2002, pp. 90-93.

¹¹² *Enquête sur l'art français* 1931, p. 182. Constable also served on the executive committee of the «Exhibition of Italian Art» in 1930 and had recently moved from the National Gallery.

¹¹³ Ivi, p. 191.

¹¹⁴ Eric Michaud has shown the extent to which this myth of a North-South dichotomy, of two «artistic phenomenalities in eternal conflict», was intrinsic to the foundation of art history as a discipline. Michaud 1996, p. 165.

¹¹⁵ *Enquête sur l'art français* 1931, p. 187.

¹¹⁶ Ivi, p. 193. Voss was a curator at the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin.

¹¹⁷ Ivi, p. 183.

¹¹⁸ Ivi, p. 188.

Italian and Dutch art! It seems to oscillate unceasingly between these two poles. It produces great painters [...] of personality, of originality»¹¹⁹.

Other major French reviews, including «Gazette des beaux-arts», «L'Amour de l'art» and «La Renaissance», also published special numbers to coincide with the event, offering century-by-century histories written by prominent art historians and critics, some of whom – René Huyghe, Henri Focillon, Jean Babylon and Jacques-Émile Blanche – were involved in planning the show. Paul Jamot, who served on the executive committee with Huyghe, wrote an extensive two-part essay on French painting for «The Burlington Magazine», in which he reiterated «the advantage of an uninterrupted continuity», that French painting alone enjoyed; «this continuity» he stressed, had remained uppermost in the minds of the organisers and was «regarded by them as one of the principles themes offered to the attention of the public»¹²⁰. In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Paul Léon, the *directeur général des Beaux-Arts*, reprised the motif of equilibrium to imply the superiority of the French school: «so as virtue, according to Aristotle, achieves a means between two excesses, our art is born of a balance between two oscillations»¹²¹. Constable went further in the commemorative catalogue, expanding upon his reply to George's *enquête* in «Formes» and more explicitly linking these two ideas to suggest that the very «continuity of tradition in French art, [was] expressed in a consistent striving for a balance between the claims of classical abstraction and of realistic imitation»¹²².

The same overarching narrative of French art that emerged so clearly from this considerable literature also plainly determined the hanging of paintings, as the French executive committee, led by Huyghe, sought to illustrate on the walls of Burlington House the sense of continuity that Jamot and Constable described. While each room was primarily devoted to a specific century, works of earlier or later dates, «which fell most harmoniously into the decorative and historical scheme»¹²³, were hung alongside. When the exhibition opened on 4 January 1932, «The Times» enthusiastically reported that the display «elucidate[d] the connexions between ancient and modern painting better than any we have ever seen before [...] What can be observed is a true evolution, or unfolding»¹²⁴. Arrangements were «widdershins»¹²⁵, reversing the usual clockwise order of the galleries (fig. 5); the visit began to the right, with an array of unattributed objects, from the ninth to the sixteenth centuries, illustrating the earliest beginnings of French painting, still then only «extricating itself from the linear bonds of the

¹¹⁹ George 1931c, p. 5.

¹²⁰ Jamot 1931, p. 257.

¹²¹ *Exhibition of French Art, 1200-1900* 1932, p. XV.

¹²² *Commemorative Catalogue of the Exhibition of French Art, 1200-1900* 1933, p. XXV.

¹²³ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁴ *The French Art Exhibition. Second Notice* 1932.

¹²⁵ *The French Art Exhibition. Popular Appeal* 1932.

illuminated page and the flat patterns of tapestry»¹²⁶. The real story began in the second gallery with artists who had come to light, «in all their brilliance»¹²⁷, as “*Les Primitifs français*” at Bouchot’s exhibition in Paris in 1904. The selection on offer in London was not extensive, but there were works by Jean Clouet, Corneille de Lyon and the Maître de Moulins (Jean Hey). Nicolas Froment’s triptych *The Raising of Lazarus* hung next to François Clouet’s *Diane de Poitiers* (fig. 6). The altarpiece panel now known as the *Pietà de Nouans* (fig. 7) was exhibited for the first time and catalogued as *The Descent from the Cross* by the School of Jean Fouquet. It hung close to the two panels of Fouquet’s *Diptyche de Melun*, brought together from Antwerp and Berlin, a proximity which encouraged Paul Jamot to attribute the work to the master himself¹²⁸.

In the third gallery, different sixteenth- and seventeenth-century personalities encountered one another: Clouet’s *Charles IX* looked out at Charles Le Brun’s presumed *Portrait de Philippe, Duc d’Orléans*, Corneille de Lyon’s *Madeleine de France* regarded Robert Nanteuil’s drawing of *Jean Dorieu, Conseiller au Grand-Conseil*, and together they oversaw the arrival of *le grand siècle*. The careful juxtaposition of works, however, sought to counter «the myth of a century imposing but cold»¹²⁹, contrasting the idealised classicism of Nicolas Poussin with the sensitive and modest observations of the Le Nain brothers and Georges de la Tour. Poussin’s *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*, hung near Louis Le Nain’s *An Interior with Peasant Family*; de la Tour’s *Nouveau-né* from Rennes appeared alongside Poussin’s *Lamentation of the Body of Christ* from Munich. Huyghe’s display illustrated what his account of the seventeenth century in «L’Amour de l’art» similarly described: that while French painting, in its innate sensibility, was attached to Northern art, it was also allied to the Mediterranean and Classical schools by virtue of its reason. «The balance between the two is France herself»¹³⁰. Poussin and Claude Lorrain then dominated gallery 4. Their «classical dignity»¹³¹ had long been popular among Britain’s nobility and gentry, and nine out of the sixteen works by Poussin, and six out of the nine paintings by Claude, had been lent by local or Irish collections, mostly private. Their later, atmospheric landscapes also appeared in the following room, plotting a passage to the eighteenth century. Galleries 5, 6, and parts of 7 then presented a veritable feast of rococo charm, but also displayed more moments of quiet humility and sensitivity: Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin’s genre scenes and Jean-Baptiste Oudry’s still-lives appeared among Antoine Watteau’s variations on *les fêtes champêtres* and the elegant female figures of François Boucher and Jean-Honoré Fragonard.

¹²⁶ *The French Art Exhibition. Second Notice* 1932.

¹²⁷ Guenne 1932, p. 40.

¹²⁸ Jamot 1932, p. 173.

¹²⁹ Du Colombier 1932, p. 39.

¹³⁰ Huyghe 1932, p. 28.

¹³¹ *The French Exhibition of Art. Popular Appeal* 1932.

Well before the exhibition opened, organisers had signalled that there were to be important, but logical, differences from earlier shows at the Royal Academy, referring specifically to «the weight of interest in the nineteenth century»¹³². From the Neoclassicism of Jacques-Louis David and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres to the Romanticism of Théodore Géricault and Eugène Delacroix, from the landscape painting of Camille Corot and the Barbizon School to the Realism of Gustave Courbet, from Impressionism to Postimpressionism: the furious developments French artists had led demanded nothing less. Such emphasis also served to give a sequential logic to the exhibitions which had taken place at Burlington House, but which had never been planned as a series, for, as Herman Voss had earlier suggested, «at the very moment when Italian and Dutch painters had said their last word, French painting came at last into her own»¹³³. It also explained why the usual order of rooms had been reversed, allowing developments to unfurl over five rooms and reach their climactic heights «at just the right moment», when the largest space could «accommodate the nineteenth-century giants»¹³⁴. On the same walls where Rubens, Rembrandt, Raphael and Titian had amazed visitors, there were now 150 works by France's modern *vedettes*, including Delacroix's *Femmes d'Algers dans leurs apartment*, Jean-François Millet's *Le Printemps*, and Auguste Renoir's *La Loge* (fig. 8). Édouard Manet's jolly fat man, *Le Bon Bock*, appeared alongside David's equestrian portrait of *Comte Stanislas Kostka Potocki*; *La Source*, by Ingres, stood next to Paul Cézanne's *La pendule noire*, «a prestigious still-life, a symphony in black and white»¹³⁵. «Cézanne, frame to frame with Ingres!», marvelled André Dezarrois, director of the *Jeu de Paume*¹³⁶. «Cézanne, rejected by the Salon, horror of the *Institut*, makes his debut at the Royal Academy between Delacroix and Ingres. All these dazzling personalities, whose struggles filled this tumultuous nineteenth century, turn this vast room into an indescribable *Salon Carré*, unique in French painting»¹³⁷.

As much Dezarrois marvelled at the liberal ease with which Huyghe juxtaposed France's acclaimed Neoclassical and Romantic masters with «Impressionist artists and even Cézanne», their inclusion in the exhibition mirrored recent accounts of French painting that, by the end of the 1920's, had firmly established the historical importance of Impressionism and even Postimpressionism¹³⁸. More remarkable was the exclusion of France's nineteenth-century academic

¹³² *French Art Exhibition. Members of Committees* 1931, p. 10.

¹³³ *Enquête sur l'art français* 1931, p. 193.

¹³⁴ *The French Exhibition of Art. Popular Appeal* 1932.

¹³⁵ Dezarrois 1932, p. 28.

¹³⁶ Dezarrois was also editor of «*Revue de l'art ancien et moderne*», the journal in which his review appeared.

¹³⁷ Dezarrois 1932, p. 28.

¹³⁸ Toby Norris points out that Impressionism fared poorly in major works of French art history published prior to the First World War, including those by Louis Hourticq and Louis Dimier, now considered extremely conservative in their outlook. He notes, however, that the situation changed

painters. Paul Léon, in his introduction to the catalogue, had explained that «we are trying to offer our hosts an image of French art [...] Our portrait will emphasise its essential traits, by stripping away the incidental, the contingent, the ephemeral»¹³⁹. The great *pompieri* and *Prix de Rome* winners of the past, reputable teachers and studio masters fêted in their lifetime at home and abroad, were thus cast as incidental and cast aside. Dezarrois, one of the few to venture a critical analysis of the display and the selection of works, remarked the way time, seconded by fashion, had now repudiated the likes of Paul Delaroche, Thomas Couture, Jean-Léon Gérôme, Gustave Moreau, and William-Adolphe Bougureau. Only Alexandre Cabanel received the most cursory of nods, his inoffensive *Portrait de Femme* hanging in room 10. Dezarrois also noted the singularity of dedicating the largest spaces to works from the past century, surmising that, in comparison to past shows, «it was our game to play; we were the only ones able to win it»¹⁴⁰. According pride of place to paintings which came from the brush of those who, in some cases, died but yesterday, happily served to prove the continued vitality of French art. Unlike its Italian, Dutch or Flemish rivals, there was «no reason to suppose» wrote Paul Jamot, «that the tree of French art [was] yet withering»¹⁴¹. In the last room, gallery 11, there were works by artists still painting in the twentieth century; Renoir had died in 1919, Monet only in 1926. Their canvases, alongside those of Georges Seurat, Toulouse Lautrec, and Paul Gauguin, including his *Spirit of the Dead Watching (Manao Tupāpau)* and *Nevermore*, brought the circuit to a close. These final steps in «the most seductive of promenades» offered proof that the «garden of French art»¹⁴² continued to bloom, even as the scope of show, limited to 1900, saved organisers the trouble of confronting the new, controversial varieties the plot had more recently yielded. The historical value of twentieth-century artistic developments in France, those collectively labelled as *l'art vivant* or *l'art indépendant*, still provoked vociferous critical debate, especially among writers like Waldemar George, who increasingly opposed pure, contemporary French painting to a cosmopolitan Parisian modernism¹⁴³.

In his account of opening night, the English correspondent for the Parisian daily «L'Intransigeant», congratulated the Franco-English committee for escaping the charge Oscar Wilde famously levelled the Royal Academy: «too many people to be able to see the pictures; too many pictures to be able to see

rapidly after 1918, when authors such as Elie Faure and Henri Focillon proclaimed the movement's significance. Norris 2009, pp. 161-163.

¹³⁹ *Exhibition of French Art, 1200-1900* 1932, p. XIV.

¹⁴⁰ Dezarrois 1932, p. 75.

¹⁴¹ Jamot 1931, p. 257.

¹⁴² Gobillot 1932, 115.

¹⁴³ For more on that nature of the debate surrounding *l'art vivant* and Georges's conceptualisation of the *École française* versus the *École de Paris* see Golan 1995 pp. 137-154; cf. Kangaslahti 2009, p. 87 and ff.

the people»¹⁴⁴. Two points of note emerge from his observation. Firstly, in comparison to the exhibition of Italian art in 1930, there were some 100 fewer paintings on display, in part a consequence of loans that were refused, but more generously imputed to a preference for quality over quantity, and enough space to regulate the presentation of works¹⁴⁵. Secondly, fewer people were going to see the show. When it closed on 6 March 1932, 340.000 visitors had passed through the exhibition, an impressive, but significantly lower number than had flocked to its Italian predecessor. «With the bringing together of works», Léon had written, «there is the bringing together of men»¹⁴⁶, but as a diplomatic exercise, and on a popular level, the “Exhibition of French Art” did not generate the same kind of excitement. While one English commentator exalted that, as a result of the display, the very soul of France was beating in the heart of Great Britain¹⁴⁷, another suggested that it palpitated only with a «prudence and respect for regulations»¹⁴⁸ that was characteristic of both France and its art. The French were content, however, to make prudence a virtue, in art as in life, and certainly at a time of international economic crisis. «The French spirit is not idealistic or impractical, but extraordinarily pragmatic and positive»¹⁴⁹. At the beginning of 1932, France had yet to feel the worst effects of the global depression, encouraging Robert Rey, among others, to claim – imprudently – that the art on display in London corroborated, and was corroborated by, what the world was then learning from the nation’s judicious economic policies¹⁵⁰.

The French show at the Royal Academy in 1932 was the last in what Max Friedländer, director of Berlin’s Kaiser Friedrich Museum, referred to as the «cultural parade of nations in London»¹⁵¹. It was the final episode in a «series» that developed accidentally, driven, according to his German colleague, Jakob Rosenberg, by the respective countries’ cultural and political propaganda needs¹⁵². Unable to surpass the incredible scale of the Italian exhibition, or offer towering masters to rival Rubens or Rembrandt, the French committee had adopted a purposeful approach and Rosenberg applauded the consistent quality of its selections and the way the display blended adjacent epochs together in order to call attention to the twin principles of «continuity» and «change»¹⁵³. Friedländer remarked the propagandistic effect of focusing upon the nineteenth-century, «boasting a thriving production as other historians and antiquarians look[ed] back on their glorious pasts», although he noted that

¹⁴⁴ Pattinson-Knight 1932a. He is paraphrasing Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

¹⁴⁵ Gobillot 1932, p. 110.

¹⁴⁶ *Exhibition of French Art, 1200-1900* 1932, p. XIV.

¹⁴⁷ Pattinson-Knight 1932b.

¹⁴⁸ *French Art at Burlington House* 1931.

¹⁴⁹ Rey 1932.

¹⁵⁰ See also George 1931b.

¹⁵¹ Friedländer 1932, p. 13.

¹⁵² Rosenberg 1932, p. 6.

¹⁵³ Ivi, p. 8.

living artists «had been carefully excluded in order to avoid controversy»¹⁵⁴. Like Rosenberg, he complimented the way organisers had created a sense of temporal continuity and an artistic rhythm based on the flows of influence from North and South, but also emphasised the fortunate political and economic conditions that had allowed a refined, unified French culture to emerge so early in and around Paris. An exhibition of German art, «devoid of the dominant centre and the uninterrupted flow», would, in contrast, «sport huge temporal gaps and be sharply divided at a local level according to tribes and towns»¹⁵⁵. While Friedländer's comparison was hypothetical, Germany's ambassador to Great Britain at the time, Konstantin von Neurath, also carefully scrutinised the French show, reporting at length to his superiors on the precise nature of its «unusually large success» among the British press and public, in the fervent hope of laying the foundations for a German equivalent, necessarily more modest in scope, but displaying pieces of first-rate quality¹⁵⁶. Von Neurath was recalled to Berlin in 1932 to serve as Foreign Minister, a position he would hold up until 1938, and the exhibition never came to fruition. The last of the great national retrospectives at the Royal Academy, the French exhibition was also the final occasion in which reputable German art historians would so freely serve as “third-party” observers to France and Italy's propagandistic cultural endeavours. Following the National Socialists' rise to power, August Mayer, Herman Voss, Friedländer, and Rosenberg all left, or were forced to leave, their institutional positions.

The increasingly rampant commingling of art historical endeavour and political ambition, embraced by many, was not without its critics. Roger Fry prefaced *Quelques réflexions sur l'art français* by suggesting that it was becoming more and more difficult to sustain very general theses on vast groups of artworks labelled French, Italian, Greek, or Chinese; any kind of dogmatic affirmation, he continued, only indicated «poorly justified prejudices and individual tastes»¹⁵⁷. Walter Friedländer, in George's *enquête* in «Formes», confessed that he did not want to «lay a wholesale embargo on all those national affinities – obscure as they often [were]», but warned that an indiscriminate belief in the «national character» of art closely accorded with «romantic-nationalist tendencies»¹⁵⁸. «The analytical historian» he advised, «need[ed] to walk warily in this domain»¹⁵⁹. In the same inquiry, Pierre du Colombier,

¹⁵⁴ Friedländer 1932, p. 13.

¹⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 18. This contention partly reflected the fact that Friedländer, like many of his generation, had a broad notion of what constituted “German” art, which, as Keith Moxey notes, frequently included Netherlandish and Flemish culture. See Moxey 2001, pp. 24-26.

¹⁵⁶ Berlin, Archiv der Akademie der Künste (henceforth AAK), *Kunstaussstellungen*, 755: fiche 3/123-128, letter from Konstantin Von Neurath to the Auswärtiges Amt in Berlin, 1st February 1932.

¹⁵⁷ Fry 1931, p. 176.

¹⁵⁸ *Enquête sur l'art français* 1931, p. 184.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

resident critic of the right-wing French newspaper «Candide», wrote that while «*some* basis of classification [was] obviously necessarily [...] a classification by nationality [was] far from perfect», and he further questioned why Hippolyte Taine's theories on race and milieu were still so widely accredited by art historians¹⁶⁰. Even Louis Dimier, a militant monarchist and erstwhile member of *Action française*, decried the «supposed permanence of a national genius throughout the centuries [as] a chimera of our times [...] Another chimera: that the genius of a people expresses itself naively and unreservedly in its art»¹⁶¹. At the other end of the political spectrum, Lionello Venturi, son of Adolfo Venturi, a distinguished scholar and critic in his own right, ventured that the history of art in Europe depended on chronology more than geography and claims otherwise had little to do with art, but belonged to «the so-called science of the “Psychology of Nations”»¹⁶². Having lost his chair at the University of Rome in August 1931, when he refused to swear allegiance to Mussolini's regime, Venturi was better versed in this subject than most. Now exiled in Paris, he was well-placed to watch as France and Italy's ongoing “cultural parade” soon resumed across the Channel.

3. *The Exhibition “L'Art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo” at the Petit Palais in Paris in 1935*

Even before it opened on 16 May 1935, the French announced that the Parisian exhibition of Italian art was to be «richer even than the one in London [...] richer and more varied»¹⁶³. “*L'Art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo*” at the Petit Palais assembled more than 1.500 objects, and of the 490 paintings on display over 300 came on loan from Italy¹⁶⁴. Their triumphant journey across the Alps re-enacted another key moment in the history of Franco-Italian cultural exchange that did not go unnoticed. «We will do it the way Napoleon did», remarked Giovanni Poggi, *soprintendente delle belle arti* of Tuscany and a member of the exhibition's executive committee, «except that when the show is over, we will bring everything back»¹⁶⁵. The sheer scale of the loans, their rarity and importance, all but effaced the memory of Burlington House five

¹⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 181.

¹⁶¹ Ivi, p. 182. Dimier's steadfast refusal to entertain the idea of a “national genius” was a governing principle of his scholarship and set him against the vast proportion of his contemporaries. See Passini 2010a.

¹⁶² Ivi, p. 182.

¹⁶³ Hazard 1935, p. 7.

¹⁶⁴ There were, additionally, some 110 sculptures, 250 drawings, 250 prints and a vast array of tapestries, manuscripts, and *objets d'art* on show, but the vast proportion of public and critical attention fell indisputably upon painting.

¹⁶⁵ Cited in Tarchiani 1935a, p. 552.

years earlier. «This manifestation of art [is] without precedent [and] without sequel»¹⁶⁶, wrote Raymond Escholier, curator of the Petit Palais. Giotto's magnificent two-metre *Crucifix* was removed from Padua's Scrovegni Chapel for the occasion, and Fra Angelico's triptych, *Descent from the Cross*, came from the Convento di San Marco in Florence. For the first time the Soviet Union lends works to a foreign capital, sending Giorgione's *Judith*, Raphael's *St George*, and two paintings by Leonardo da Vinci, *The Benois Madonna* and (the less certain) *Madonna Litta* (fig. 9), from Leningrad's Hermitage Museum. Whereas London had not exhibited a single painting by da Vinci, Paris boasted six. It was, in Escholier's estimation, «such a pile a treasures as exceeded the limits of human reason»¹⁶⁷. Little wonder even Italy's own citizens were entreated to imitate the journey the works had undertaken, to see «una esposizione, quale non si è mai veduta e non si vedrà mai più»¹⁶⁸.

As Paul Valéry suggested in his *préambule* to the catalogue, however, the first object of wonder to behold at the Petit Palais was not the painting on display, but the symbolism of its presence, «Italy's magnificent reply to France's noble request»¹⁶⁹. During the First World War, as common heirs to, and defenders of, a Mediterranean classical tradition, France and Italy had formed a «latin bloc» against Germanic barbarism, but relations between the two countries swiftly declined in the war's aftermath¹⁷⁰. Following his rise to power, Mussolini had exploited Italian resentment over the terms of the 1919 Paris Peace Agreement to solidify his own rule; his meddling in the Balkans, France's alliance with Yugoslavia in 1927, and the countries' competing colonial interests in North Africa had further estranged these *sœurs latines*¹⁷¹. When, in May 1934, Mussolini received the newly appointed *directeur général des Beaux-Arts*, Georges Huisman, and France's Ambassador to Italy, Charles de Chambrun, and agreed to support an exhibition of Italian art in Paris, the seeds of a political *rapprochement* between the two nations were already being sewn¹⁷². Their mutual interest in Austrian independence, threatened by Hitler's ambitions for a greater Germany, paved the way for the Franco-Italian Agreement of January 1935 between Mussolini and France's Foreign Minister,

¹⁶⁶ *L'Art Italien. Chefs-d'œuvre de la peinture 1935*, n.p.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶⁸ Tarchiani 1935b, p. 38.

¹⁶⁹ *Exposition de l'Art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo 1935*, p. III.

¹⁷⁰ Fraixe, Poupault 2014, p. 18.

¹⁷¹ For the different ways in which the notion of *latinité* punctuated cultural relations and discourse between France and Italy in the interwar period, see the many essays in Fraixe, Piccioni, Poupault 2014. For a longer historical and supranational view, see Pommier 2004; see also Michaud 2012.

¹⁷² This meeting is described by Huisman himself in his *avant-propos* in the catalogue. *Exposition de l'Art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo 1935*, p. i. Catherine Fraixe has examined the role of the French in the initial conception of the project. See Fraixe 2014a, pp. 210-213.

Pierre Laval¹⁷³. Numerous cultural and artistic exchanges further cultivated this *entente*, likened, at the time, to the sort of care needed to grow a difficult plant¹⁷⁴. Botticelli's *Primavera* did not accompany her famous companion, but when *The Birth of Venus* arrived in Paris in the spring of 1935 «*le Printemps italo-français*»¹⁷⁵ was in full flower. The influential businessman Senatore Borletti presented the exhibition to the French public as a «sumptuous Italian embassy of beauty»¹⁷⁶, beauty intended to «sing a hymn to [our] fraternity [...] our shared *latinité*»¹⁷⁷. *Latinité*, however, was not to be mistaken for communal ties of race or blood – there was no probing value to such fallacious (German) arguments, Ugo Ojetti insisted in his preface to the catalogue. It was rather a question of civilisation, a conception of the world shaped over time by shared moral, legal, religious and, most importantly, cultural institutions¹⁷⁸. In his speech inaugurating the exhibition, Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law and the Undersecretary for Press and Propaganda, even took the opportunity to distinguish this reunited “latin bloc” from its traditional – resurgent – sylvan foe: «For we Latins, the moral world has always had a clear architecture, simple, solid and secure; for other peoples it is a forest [...] of shadows and darkness, where it is difficult to recognise each other, and one must always proceed cautiously, bearing arms»¹⁷⁹.

The exhibition, in its very planning and the composition of its committees, seemed to manifest this renewed spirit of civilised cooperation. Senator Henry de Jouvenel, France's former ambassador to Italy, and the well-connected Borletti jointly presided over the general *Comité d'organisation*, aided by Huisman, and Henri Verne, director of France's *Musées Nationaux*¹⁸⁰. Escholier served as the exhibition's *Commissaire général*, assisting the omnipresent Ojetti, who, promoted from his ancillary role in London, led the Italian executive committee. As Martina Dei recently describes, however, relations between the different parties were not always fraternal¹⁸¹. Ojetti had early determined that – on this occasion – Italy would not be browbeaten by its host, and he

¹⁷³ Much literature exists on the changing nature of Franco-Italian relations in the lead-up to the Rome Agreement. See, for example, Duroselle, Sera 1981; Duroselle, Sera 1986, and therein especially Declava 1986; Guillen 1991; Declava, Milza 1996; and Poupault 2014.

¹⁷⁴ Pecci Blunt 1935.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁶ Borletti 1935, p. 3.

¹⁷⁷ Ivi, p. 5. See Emily Braun's analysis of Fascism's co-option of “humanism” and “*latinité*” as a means of political persuasion. Braun 2009, pp. 174-175. See also Fraixe 2014, p. 214.

¹⁷⁸ *Exposition de l'Art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo* 1935, p. XII.

¹⁷⁹ *L'Exposition d'art italien a été inaugurée hier* 1935, p. 4.

¹⁸⁰ A veritable army of national curators and administrators made up the members of the general committee. For full listings see *Exposition de l'Art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo* 1935, pp. XXXIX-XLV. Using the available archival correspondence on both sides, Annadea Salvatore has carefully pieced together the interactions of exhibition organisers and the tense negotiation of loans. See Salvatore 2014.

¹⁸¹ Dei 2011, p. 81 and ff.

was both exasperated by the many requests his French counterparts made «without rhyme or reason»¹⁸² and shocked by their oversights and errors of attribution¹⁸³. Yet he also clashed repeatedly with his compatriot Borletti, each determined to assert his authority over the other on any number of issues. There was also, just as there had been five years earlier, more than a little coercion in securing loans for an exhibition backed by dictatorial decree. «I want it to be magnificent», Mussolini had told Ojetti, «if you encounter the least resistance let me know»¹⁸⁴. Even Ettore Modigliani, director of the Brera, who had worked so tirelessly on the exhibition at Burlington House, found himself compelled to lend a painting to Paris he had refused to send to London, Raphael's *The Marriage of the Virgin*¹⁸⁵. Requests for works from foreign institutions proved more complicated. The Soviets withheld formal approval up until the very last moment¹⁸⁶; Britain, according to its laws, refused to send key works from its national collections¹⁸⁷; so too did Germany, a rejection that French diplomats interpreted as «aimed [solely] at Italy, and due to Hitler»¹⁸⁸. Hungary agreed finally to send Giorgione's *Portrait of a Man*, Correggio's *Madonna del Latte* and two other paintings, but only in exchange for three works from French collections for the duration of the exhibition¹⁸⁹. Whatever the machinations behind the scenes, however, outwardly any difficulties were seamlessly resolved through bipartisan good will. Costs were evenly shared between France and Italy and, in a particularly deft stroke, Mussolini waived indemnity for works from Italy's national collections, «entrusting them to the French State»¹⁹⁰. Escholier summed up the general feeling when he cited the declaration of one

¹⁸² Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (henceforth BNCf), Mss. da ord. 250, P.V.P. 1, 9, I, c. 15, letter from Ugo Ojetti to Galeazzo Ciano, 23 December 1934. Dei 2011, p. 82.

¹⁸³ Ojetti was so shocked at the number of mistakes in one list he received that he refused either to take it seriously or to believe that Paul Jamot, René Huyghe or any other curator from the Louvre had been involved in drafting it. BNCf, Mss. da ord. 250, P.V.P. 1, 9, II, unnumbered sheet, letter from Ugo Ojetti to Galeazzo Ciano, 30 December 1934.

¹⁸⁴ BNCf, Mss. da ord. 250, P.V.P. 1, 15, I, c. 107. Dei 2011, p. 81. Escholier quoted Mussolini verbatim in *L'Art Italien. Chefs-d'œuvre de la peinture 1935*, n.p.

¹⁸⁵ Although Modigliani, as *soprintendente delle belle arti* of Lombardy, was listed as a member of the exhibition's executive committee under Ojetti, by 1935 he was increasingly the victim of political intrigues and lost his post suddenly the same year. Haskell 1999, p. 469.

¹⁸⁶ Salvatore 2014, pp. 127-128.

¹⁸⁷ It is hardly a coincidence that in the years between the "Exhibition of Italian Art" at the Royal Academy and the show in Paris, British Parliament twice debated the loan abroad of foreign art from national collections: once in December 1930, when Edgar Vincent, Viscount D'Abernon, former chairman of the Royal Commission on National Museums and Galleries, unsuccessfully sponsored the British Museum & National Gallery (Overseas Loans) Bill; and again in January 1935, when the British Museum was excluded, and the National Gallery (Overseas Loans) Bill was introduced. It too failed.

¹⁸⁸ Braun 2005, p. 179.

¹⁸⁹ The three works were Watteau's *Reunion dans un parc*, Honoré Daumier's *L'amateur d'estampes* and Courbet's *Les demoiselles des bords de la Seine*, the latter two from the collections of the Petit Palais. Salvatore 2014, p. 114.

¹⁹⁰ *Italian art in Paris 1935*.

his packers before Da Vinci's *Annunciation* from the Uffizi: «Well *mon vieux*, there's no doubt about it. They sent us the pick of the bunch!»¹⁹¹.

Whereas in London in 1930 the British had elected to present works century-by-century, in the honeycombed galleries of the Petit Palais organisers devised an itinerary based on locality, beginning in fifteenth-century Florence (fig. 10). In the «Bulletin des Musées de France», Charles Sterling, Huyghe and Jamot's colleague at the Louvre, explained the disparity according to the shows' different goals and intended audiences. Aimed at art historians and an elite public, «the exhibition at Burlington House sought to show the evolution of Italian painting as completely possible», and so had included, «alongside the works of the great masters, judiciously chosen examples by secondary artists» according to a principle of chronological development. In Paris, the criteria had been to «show Italian art both as a whole, through its painting, sculpture and minor arts, and at its very finest», and as such «a greater number of masterpieces by individual masters» had been grouped together according to place, for the pleasure of «artists and the greater public». Sterling's account obscured the fact that the display was not the work of French organisers, but Ojetti's Italian colleagues, the art historians Carlo Gamba, Nello Tarchiani and Giovanni Poggi. Their choice of a geographical scheme that began with the Florentine quattrocento undoubtedly reflected a certain amount of personal and professional bias: Gamba was *ispettore onorario* of the Florentine galleries, Tarchiani was director of the Royal Galleries of Florence, and Poggi was *soprintendente delle belle arti* of Tuscany. Secondly, given that Italy was concertedly reviving past cultural glories in order to legitimate present political claims, it was also shrewd to start with a moment in history when, as Roger Crum has written elsewhere, the Florentines «had brought about a revival in art and in society»¹⁹². Arrangements by school also manifested a more complex, strategic relationship to the peninsula's multiple histories: room-by-room the exhibits celebrated the individual traditions of Italy's historic city states and principalities – still a keen source of municipal pride – even as the exhibition as a whole subsumed these different parts into a glorious, shared artistic patrimony¹⁹³. The facade of the Petit Palais was even made over according to the same strategy for the show's opening, whereby the ensigns and escutcheons of participating Italian cities hung between the building's columns, while an enormous Italian flag, overlaid against the French *tricolore*, adorned the entrance, bearing the words «*L'Art italien*» (fig. 11).

Yet as the French art historian Louis Horticq wrote at the time, the painters of Florence were the students of sculptors; «one must never forget», he reminded

¹⁹¹ Bromberger 1935.

¹⁹² Crum 2005, p. 139. On Fascism's strategic use of the past see also Lazzaro 2005.

¹⁹³ I am grateful to Elisa Camporeale for emphasising to me the continued importance of Italy's municipal identities and to Giuliana Tomasella for bringing to my attention the exterior photograph of the Petit Palais.

his readers, «that Florentine drawing translates a sculptural vision»¹⁹⁴. So in the first rooms visitors found an aspect of Italian art that had been sorely neglected in London: marble and bronze sculptures and bas-reliefs, including Lorenzo Ghiberti and Filippo Brunelleschi's competing entries of *The Sacrifice of Isaac* for the design of Florence's Baptistry doors. From room 4 onwards the exhibition then traced «the formation of the modern style» according to Vasari, «what might be called the Florentine grammar of perspective, anatomy and chiaroscuro»¹⁹⁵, beginning with the paintings of Masaccio, Andrea del Castagno, Filippo Lippi, and two of Paolo Ucello's panels from his series of cavalry engaged in the *Battle of San Romano*. *The Birth of Venus* followed in room 5, alongside another five of Botticelli's works and others by Ghirlandaio, Antonio del Pollaiuolo, Andrea del Verrocchio and Lorenzo di Credi. Tuscan painting ceded to the classicism of Umbria in the cinquecento in rooms 6 and 7, while in room 8 visitors moved north through the schools of Emilia and Lombardy. The rough, chronological flow of the journey was then interrupted. To the left of the next room, a turreted staircase ascended to the upper galleries 11, 12 and 13, leading visitors back in time to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries through a selection of early Italian painting from Cimabue to Giotto to Fra Angelico. Implicitly critical of the poor treatment these artists had received in London, Tarchiani emphasised that this was first time that «our so-called primitives – so wise and conscious – have been widely represented in a general retrospective»¹⁹⁶. «They have been placed a little aside», he continued, in rooms painted pale grey, «to give them a space devoid of decoration and attract an attentive and curious crowd»¹⁹⁷. Their (dis)placement, however, formed a temporal and physical detour from the principle and celebratory path of the Renaissance, which visitors only resumed in returning back downstairs to the large rotunda and the crimson triumph of the Venetian rooms¹⁹⁸.

Due to a discrepancy in size between rooms 9 and 14, the sixteenth-century painters Palma Vecchio, Bartolomeo Veneto and Bonifazio Veronese appeared before their predecessors, Jacopo and Giovanni Bellini and Vittore Carpaccio, but in Paris, as in London, the Venetian school proved critically popular. In emphasising its «wholly personal countenance»¹⁹⁹, however, French reviewers more explicitly attributed Venice's singularity, beginning with the brilliance of the Bellini family, to the city-state's unique status as a Republic and the prosperity of its merchant class²⁰⁰. Moving into the sixteenth century, freed from strict obedience to the church under the protection of the doge, Venetian

¹⁹⁴ Hourticq 1935, p. 23.

¹⁹⁵ Ivi, p. 22.

¹⁹⁶ Tarchiani 1935b, p. 38.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹⁸ Iamurri 2014, p. 267.

¹⁹⁹ Grappe 1935, p. 51.

²⁰⁰ *Ibidem*; and Besson 1935.

artists played «a preponderant role in the revolution to come»²⁰¹, heralding, as Paul Jamot explained in the exhibition catalogue, a new era for art, that of painting divorced from religion. In their acute observations of light, their taste for dazzling colour, their flare for dramatic composition, Giorgione, Titian, Veronese, Tintoretto were, according to Jamot and others, the true precursors of modern painting²⁰². In the *Salle Ovale*, the exhibition's "tribune de gloire" (fig. 12), alongside Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Michelangelo's tondo of *The Holy Family*, Giorgione and Titian appeared by virtue of their invention of what Jamot called the most perfect of profane themes, «the beauty of women in the beauty of nature»²⁰³. *The Tempest* and *Judith*, both by Giorgione, hung alongside the Louvre's *Le Concert champêtre*, a work then credited to the artist, but which Hourticq unequivocally insisted was by Titian²⁰⁴. Titian's sensuous beauties, *Woman with a Mirror*, *Flora* and the *Venus of Urbino*, the model of every reclining nude since, from Velasquez to Manet, flanked Tintoretto's *Susanne and the Elders*. Tintoretto then received his own tribute in room 16, a mini-retrospective in which the artist's lush depictions of *Adam and Eve* and *Narcissus at the Fountain* hung together with a further eleven of his works, in appreciation of the «frenzied drama that heralded romanticism»²⁰⁵.

At the turn of the century, general opinion of the Baroque had been poor, in Italy as in France, but it underwent a revival between the wars, due in part, as Escholier acknowledged now²⁰⁶, to the admirable show of "*La pittura italiana del Seicento e del Settecento*" at the Palazzo Pitti in Florence in 1922. Then, Ojetti, Gamba, Poggi and Tarchiani had sought to convince their audience that the era did not signify the decadence of Italian painting, but rather heralded «a return, as in the Early Renaissance, to provincial schools and regional varieties [...] of free and individual character»²⁰⁷. The same scholars now worked to insure the once maligned Bolognese artists of the seventeenth century, Annibale and Ludovico Carracci, Guercino, Guido Reni and Domenichino, received their due in Paris, installing a broad selection of their works in the prime corner space of gallery 17. As recently as the end of 1934, Paul Jamot and Charles Sterling had similarly reacquainted the French public with the forgotten achievements of France's own early seventeenth century in an exhibition at the Orangerie, "*Les Peintres de la réalité en France au XVII^e siècle*". In wanting «to show the vitality and diversity of the realist current in France in the seventeenth century, its high artistic qualities, its very particular characteristics»²⁰⁸, Jamot

²⁰¹ *Exposition de l'Art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo* 1935, p. xxix.

²⁰² Hourticq 1935, pp. 27-28; and Grappe 1935, pp. 52-53.

²⁰³ *Exposition de l'Art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo* 1935, p. xxix.

²⁰⁴ Hourticq 1935, pp. 30-32.

²⁰⁵ Besson 1935.

²⁰⁶ *L'Art Italien* 1935, p. 7.

²⁰⁷ Ojetti, Dami, Tarchiani 1924, p. 11. See also Miraglio 2011; and Haskell 2000, pp. 128-134.

²⁰⁸ Sterling 1935b, p. 6.

and Sterling had revived the reputations of painters «so long hidden by the pomp of Versailles»²⁰⁹: the Le Nain brothers, Philippe de Champaigne, and, most significantly, France's own “*caravagesque*”, Georges de la Tour²¹⁰. With an eye newly accustomed to, or appreciative of, French tenebrism, visitors to the Petit Palais in 1935 were perhaps more inclined to consider the merits of Caravaggio's painting in room 20, the artist whom Sterling himself had described as «the origin of this new research in the sphere of pictorial light»²¹¹. For Hourticq, at least, the chiaroscuro and frank naturalism of Caravaggio's *Madonna dei Pellegrini*, *The Conversion of Saint Paul* and *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter* constituted one of the true revelations of the exhibition²¹². The show concluded, as per its title, with eighteenth-century Venice. But French critics did not generally accord Tiepolo, «the Veronese of the Rococo»²¹³, much originality, seeing in the *morbidezza* of his large works, such as *The Immaculate Conception*, «the frivolous breath, full of grace»²¹⁴, that infused the century. With the delicate tones of Canaletto and Francesco Guardi's Venetian scenes, «the last glorious flames of Italian art extinguished over the Laguna»²¹⁵.

Except the show was not over, because, as Borletti explained, «we have added modern works to affirm the admirable continuity of our tradition through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries»²¹⁶. Organisers, however, had learnt from their experience at Burlington House that too close a proximity to the glories of the past did not flatter modern Italian painting. The solution, as Huisman signalled in his *avant-propos*, was to present this extravaganza of Italian art in two parts²¹⁷.

Where the Petit Palais left off – Italy's last recognised Old Masters – the Musée du Jeu du Paume began: with modern and contemporary artists, in a display devised by the secretary general of the Venice Biennale, Antonio Maraini, in conjunction with the museum's director, André Dezarrois²¹⁸. As Dezarrois explained in the catalogue, these works offered proof that, contrary to popular opinion, «the flame [of Italian art] had not died»²¹⁹. During the difficult years of

²⁰⁹ Gauthier 1935, p. 56.

²¹⁰ Pierre Georgel partly restaged the 1934 exhibition at the Orangerie in 2007, examining its advent in light of the nationalism of the day, the contemporary compulsion to trace the “national genius” in art, and the resurgence of a figurative and realist tendency in painting. See Georgel 2007. On the 1934 show, see also Haskell 2000, pp. 134-142.

²¹¹ Sterling 1935b, p. 4.

²¹² Hourticq 1935, p. 33.

²¹³ Ivi, p. 34.

²¹⁴ Grappe 1935, p. 54.

²¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

²¹⁶ Borletti 1935, p. 3.

²¹⁷ *L'Art italien des XIX^e et XX^e siècles* 1935, p. 13. Exactly the same *avant-propos* was published in the catalogue for the Petit Palais, *Exposition de l'Art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo* 1935.

²¹⁸ For more on the planning of the display at the Jeu de Paume, see Tomasella 1998.

²¹⁹ *L'Art italien des XIX^e et XX^e siècles* 1935, p. 34.

the *Risorgimento*, «it was preserved in the provincial centres»²²⁰ of Milan and Florence: in the Lombardic romanticism of Daniele Ranzoni and Tranquillo Cremona, who mixed a Leonardesque chiaroscuro with Impressionist sentiment²²¹; and in the works of the Tuscan *Macchiaioli* like Giovanni Fattori and Silvestro Lega. In modern-day Italy, «renascent, saved and made beautiful by Fascism»²²², the flame burned with a new intensity in the works of contemporary artists like Carlo Carrà, Gino Severini, Enrico Prampolini, Giorgio de Chirico, Felice Casorati and Mario Tozzi. The *novocento*, promised Margherita Sarfatti, was to be «a period of art visibly Italian in character»²²³. While more charitable than their English counterparts had been, even French critics predisposed towards Fascism, including Waldemar George, were faint in their praise. Casorati was «eclectic and indecisive»²²⁴; Prampolini's aerodynamic Cubism was «simply out-of-date [...] de Chirico seemed no less infantile and exhausted»²²⁵. The most the vociferous reactionary Camille Mauclair could offer was that «these artists, whether or not we understand them and like them, are always sincere and pure, unsullied by mercantile speculation and venal criticism»²²⁶. His remarks were less a tribute to the Italian art on display than a tacit reference to what he deemed to be the French «farce» of *l'art vivant*²²⁷.

For conservative French commentators convinced that contemporary art in France was in spiritual crisis, an entire generation of artists fooled, according to Mauclair, by the «chimera of the new»²²⁸, the real exemplars were back at the Petit Palais. «Here [was] the real *l'art vivant*»²²⁹. As Paul Valéry had written in the catalogue, no artist during the Renaissance believed they had to create their own aesthetic, deform nature in a way that was exclusively their own²³⁰. «This lesson of masterpieces», agreed Paul Hazard, came at an opportune time, «when, in our own art we seek a balance between recent discoveries and eternal beauty»²³¹. But there was more on display here than merely art,

²²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²²¹ Ivi, p. 22.

²²² Ivi, p. 35.

²²³ Sarfatti 1935. Salvatore suggests that Sarfatti in fact had deep misgivings about displaying contemporary Italian art in Paris, due to the unfavourable comparisons it might encourage. See Salvatore 2014, p. 20.

²²⁴ George 1935, p. 58.

²²⁵ Mauclair 1935b, p. 56.

²²⁶ Ivi, p. 54.

²²⁷ The focus of Mauclair's ire in his critical writings, a collection of which was collated in 1929 under the very title *La Farce de l'art vivant*, was not only the formal nature of contemporary painting, but also the unscrupulous (Jewish) dealers whom he believed promoted new tendencies of no artistic value and encouraged the overproduction of works for wholly mercantile reasons. For more on Mauclair's xenophobia see Golan 1995, pp. 150-152.

²²⁸ Mauclair 1935a, p. 325.

²²⁹ Ivi, p. 326.

²³⁰ *Exposition de l'Art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo* 1935, p. vii.

²³¹ Hazard 1935, p. 8.

however masterful. According to Ojetti in the «Corriere della Sera», in lending these works *il Duce* was presenting France with nothing less than «the eternal face of Italy» and he entreated the French public «to look at it straight in the eye, now that you have returned cordially as a friend»²³². By the time it closed on the 21 July 1935, nearly 650.000 people had visited the exhibition in Paris. Most, like the city's own *président du Conseil municipal*, Georges Contenot, had been happy not only «to admire present-day Italy through the splendours of its dazzling past», but also to see in the show «a kind of proof that this people, [...] under an illustrious latin leader, was today putting its power in the service of peace»²³³. The suspicions that the French had harboured towards Fascist Italy now seemed entirely unwarranted and Mussolini, Jacques Guenne suggested, had been wholly misrepresented. «Bad photographers, impatient filmmakers have given us the wrathful faces or threatening gestures of *il Duce*, [but] we know now that his strength stems from his placidity and wisdom»²³⁴. The Italian masterpieces in Paris, graciously lent and rapturously received, reassuringly testified to the renewed spiritual unity and strength of the latin bloc, at a time when, «on the other side of the Rhine, the clamour of arms mounts [...] How to reply to this provocation of a race which thinks itself elected to dominate the earth? By the majesty of Roman peace, the trophies of humanism! The Teutons mobilise their planes, their engines of death and destruction, we, the sons of *la Louve*, we will mobilise beauty»²³⁵.

Even before the exhibition opened, however, the anti-fascist critic Mario Mascarin had warned that Italy's cultural policies were nothing but an illusory mask, cautioning his French readers that «Fascism only shows one of its faces, and not, evidently its true being»²³⁶. The show at the Petit Palais peddled the political myth of Fascist Italy as a contemporary force for peace, pledging a modern-day *pax romana*, a symbolism apparent even in the entrance hall. The ancient Roman muse Melpomene stood beneath the main dome, surrounded by «the founders of Roman order»²³⁷, Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus, overseen, from the second gallery, by a copy of the *Lupa Capitolina*, that «very palladium of *latinité*»²³⁸, and, from the opposite side of the cupola, Giuseppe Graziosi's bronze bust of Mussolini. The ensemble served as a reminder, Escholier wrote, «that art cannot live without the security that gives it power»²³⁹. In order even to reach the foyer, visitors first crossed the threshold – parapet – of a Petit Palais

²³² Ojetti 1935.

²³³ *L'Exposition d'art italien a été inaugurée hier* 1935.

²³⁴ Guenne 1935. Guenne conveniently ignored the fact that Mussolini personally vetted the release (or not) of every image of himself.

²³⁵ Brousson 1935, p. 2.

²³⁶ Mascarin 1935.

²³⁷ *L'Art Italien* 1935, p. 5.

²³⁸ *Ibidem*.

²³⁹ *L'Art Italien. Chefs-d'œuvre de la peinture* 1935, n.p.

«under siege»²⁴⁰, surrounded by wooden palings, behind which steel-helmeted sentries from France's *Garde Mobile* stood to attention, armed with bayoneted rifles, oddly militaristic companions for works of art that came in peace. Maurice Raynal and Tériade, under the pseudonym "*les deux aveugles*", satirised the martial forces mobilising art in their review «La Bête Noire», although in this instance the politician parading in front of these masterpieces was not Mussolini, but his signatory on the Rome Agreement, Pierre Laval. In a photomontage that appeared alongside (fig. 13), France's heavy-set Foreign Minister emerges from the sea in full military uniform, imposed upon Botticelli's *Venus* in such a way that her flowing locks form an elaborate *casque de cuirassier*. «To be blind» they wrote, «is to choose what one sees»²⁴¹. What Raynal and Tériade spied, behind several beautiful masterpieces lost in a miscellany of mediocrity, was a propaganda exercise of such gigantic proportions that the French public failed to realise many of the best works had come from French collections. The artist Paul Signac read the signs more ominously, appalled that «Fascism, the extinguisher of human thought, [sought] to claim these leading lights», seeing «now, before all this, [only] the blackshirts of hangmen and torturers»²⁴². But by October 1935, as Italian forces invaded Ethiopia, Fascism revealed its true face and any Frenchmen once dazzled by the brilliance of so many Renaissance masterpieces were left no illusions about the peaceable limits of Mussolini's Third Rome.

4. The "Chefs d'œuvre de l'art français" at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 1937

«Why», asked André Dezarrois, in the course of reviewing the exhibition of French art at the Royal Academy in 1932, «did we never stage it ourselves, as part of our great expositions, the one in 1900, for example?»²⁴³. It was a pertinent question. Since the inaugural Parisian event in 1855, exhibitions of art had fulfilled a prominent role in the *Expositions universelles*, but in keeping with a principle of progress, such exhibits had been limited first to the work of the living, and then, from 1889, in the case of the *Centennale*, to art produced in the last century. These displays still carried strong, nationalist overtones. As both Paul Greenhalgh and Eric Hobsbawm have argued, the *Expositions universelles* were part of the nation's post-revolutionary construction of "Frenchness", occasions to represent unity, consensus and prosperity, in

²⁴⁰ Brousson 1935, p. 1.

²⁴¹ *Les Deux Aveugles* [Raynal et Tériade] 1935.

²⁴² *Les peintres français devant les maîtres italiens* 1935, p. 6.

²⁴³ Dezarrois 1932, p. 74.

which France's role as Europe's cultural torchbearer figured strongly²⁴⁴. For these reasons, during preparations for the *Exposition internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne*, scheduled to open in Paris in May 1937, Paul Léon, in his new role as the fair's *Commissaire générale adjoint*, swore that art would have the place it deserved: «the premier! It expresses that which is best in us; it is the incarnation of the national genius»²⁴⁵. By the end of 1936, however, despite Léon's lofty pronouncement, no place had been reserved for the display of the nation's accumulated artistic wealth, an omission Louis Gillet subsequently likened to «the well-known story of the all-powerful fairy left out of the celebrations»²⁴⁶. The oversight was all the more conspicuous because France, as host, was in ever greater need of the cachet its artistic dominance typically guaranteed.

The *Exposition internationale* in 1937 coincided with a period of economic stagnation, social instability and political conflict, in France as abroad²⁴⁷. Gone was the confidence of early 1932, when the country's «economic *risorgimento*»²⁴⁸, like its pictorial tradition, had manifested proof of the nation's virtuous prudence and respect for measure. France had not escaped the ill-winds of global depression blowing elsewhere, and the economic hardship it brought inflamed social schisms and political volatility, spilling onto the streets in skirmishes between extra-parliamentary, right-wing *ligues* and left-wing demonstrators²⁴⁹. The violent factiousness paved the way for an anti-fascist coalition of the Radicals, Socialists and French Communists in July 1935, leading to the rise to power of the Popular Front in the elections of April and May 1936. Plans for the *Exposition internationale* were well underway when the new government, led by the Socialist Léon Blum, inherited the project, in the face of considerable opposition willing its failure²⁵⁰. Aware of the litmus test to his administration, it was Blum who, in December 1936, charged Jean Zay, the Minister for National Education and Fine Arts, and Georges Huisman

²⁴⁴ Hobsbawm 1983, p. 271; and Greenhalgh 1988, p. 114.

²⁴⁵ Labbé 1938, vol. 4, p. 637.

²⁴⁶ Gillet 1937, p. 274.

²⁴⁷ The Paris exposition was, scholars have recently suggested, «as disorderly as the European politics in which it was embedded». Kargon, Fiss, Low, Molella 2015, p. 7.

²⁴⁸ George 1931b.

²⁴⁹ The history of France in the 1930's has been frequently documented in relation both to the «decline», «decadence» or «demise» of the Third Republic and the ongoing culture wars between left and right. See, for example, Duroselle 1979; Bernard, Dubief 1985; Jackson 1986; Lebovics 1992; McMillan 1992; Weber 1994; and Young 2004.

²⁵⁰ Pascal Ory offers a panoramic account of the Popular Front's ambitious cultural agenda, pursued under the intellectual leadership of Blum and young ministers such as Jean Zay and Léo Lagrange. Following its election, the new administration made many additions to the *Exposition* programme and Ory counts the retrospective of French art at the Palais de Tokyo among what he nominates as «*sites de gauche*», part of wider attempts to popularise the event and familiarise the «people» with its own national heritage. See Ory 1994, p. 31; see also Weiser 1981. For a general history of the Popular Front see Jackson 1988.

with co-ordinating a vast exhibition of French art to inaugurate the newly built Palais de Tokyo²⁵¹. The “*Chefs d’œuvre de l’art français*” was an act of legitimation. Blum made this explicitly clear, in familiar terms, to his Minister of Foreign Affairs, during preparations for the event: «I attach a very particular importance to this exhibition, where the prestige of France itself is at stake»²⁵². A time when the contemporary face of the country was visibly conflicted, the state was investing in a retrospective display of *le patrimoine* to preserve the pride of *la patrie*, before its international rivals²⁵³.

While the “*Chefs d’œuvre de l’art français*” was an exhibition of French art staged in France, it was directed towards «the considerable public from around the world»²⁵⁴ that the *Exposition internationale* was to attract to Paris. In their stated aim to bring before this international audience an «ensemble of artworks, the likes of which [had] never before been seen»²⁵⁵, organisers tacitly voiced a want to eclipse the display of French art assembled at Burlington House in 1932. From the outset there were two key differences between the exhibitions. First and foremost was the issue of the Louvre, which had lent 170 items to London. Its collections were, understandably, to remain intact intact for the duration of the *Expo*. Instead, organisers deliberately sought unfamiliar and inaccessible pieces from provincial and foreign museums and from private lenders, gathering works from seventeen countries that had been separated for centuries «by oceans, continents or simply the walls of private life»²⁵⁶. In so doing, Paris was to be enriched with a «second Louvre»²⁵⁷, an «ephemeral Louvre, a supplemental Louvre»²⁵⁸, attesting not only to the sheer breadth of the nation’s art, but the esteem in which it was held worldwide. Huisman prefaced his requests to foreign institutions by observing that «French art has shone forth so brightly throughout the world [...] that it is often beyond the borders of France it appears with the most brilliance»²⁵⁹. The spectacle was to be all the more «stunning», echoed Zay, because it would bring together works that had remained on native soil with others that had travelled afar²⁶⁰. By means of their happy reunification, he continued, visitors would find a resplendent vision, not merely of art, but also of nation: «in this exhibition

²⁵¹ *Chefs-d’œuvre de l’art français* 1937, p. VII.

²⁵² AN *Sous-série Beaux-Arts*, F/21/4082, letter from Léon Blum to Yvon Delbos, 15 February 1937.

²⁵³ On the claims of national identity staked through the display of art within the exhibition, see Kangaslahti 2006 pp. 277-282; and, more recently, Ducci 2015, pp. 390-396.

²⁵⁴ AN *Sous-série Beaux-Arts*, F/21/4082, letter from Georges Huisman to André François-Poncet, French Ambassador to Germany, 5 February 1937.

²⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁵⁶ Huisman 1937.

²⁵⁷ Gillet 1937, p. 275.

²⁵⁸ Lécuyer 1937.

²⁵⁹ AN *Sous-série Beaux-arts*, F/21/4729, letter from Georges Huisman to William Valentiner, director of the Detroit Institute of Arts, 24 February 1937.

²⁶⁰ *Chefs-d’œuvre de l’art français* 1937, p. VII.

France will show herself as both rooted and radiating, that is to say in all the fullness of her reality»²⁶¹. Secondly, the choice of title indicated the show's scope and limits. In contrast to the exhibition at the Royal Academy, «it [was] not to be about a history of French art, but a reunion of *masterpieces*»²⁶². As Huisman announced well before it even opened, «the exhibition will be much less a systematic lesson than a marvellous promenade in the past»²⁶³. «There [was] to be nothing systematic», explained Robert Burnand, «nothing that smells of pedantry nor the pitiless rigidity of certain methods»²⁶⁴.

The tendency of exhibition organisers to downplay the interpretative nature of their display, or to disavow their strategies of representation, seems at first incongruous because in the years since the French show in London great strides had been made in the study of museum practices²⁶⁵. In 1934, the International Museums Office had organised the first international conference on museology in Madrid, a seminal moment in the history of the field, when experts gathered from around the world to share recent developments in the architecture and design of art museums, with particular reference to the most desirable methods of installation²⁶⁶. Three years later the fairgrounds of the *Exposition internationale* became an important site for the diffusion of this fledgling discipline and its techniques. Many of the scholars and curators who oversaw the imposing display of French masterpieces in one half of the Palais de Tokyo also co-ordinated the fair's museological section, located in the opposite wing of the same complex²⁶⁷. They assembled an impressive array of statistics, photographs, and *maquettes* and the different exhibits traced the evolution of the museum from the nineteenth century to the present day, schooling visitors in contemporary problems of conservation, diffusion and display, through international comparisons²⁶⁸. Whereas museums once seemed to be evocations of the past, René Huyghe explained, today they were called upon to play an immediate and genuine public role. The latest methods of presentation, of

²⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

²⁶² AN *Sous-série Beaux-arts*, F/21/4729, transcript of a publicity segment for Radio Paris, 6:00pm, 22 February 1937 (my emphasis).

²⁶³ *Ibidem*.

²⁶⁴ Burnand 1937.

²⁶⁵ See, for example, Poncelet 2008; see also Kott 2013.

²⁶⁶ The proceedings of the conference were published in two volumes in French, with a familiar list of contributors, including the ubiquitous Ugo Ojetti, who provided his thoughts on *Expositions permanentes et expositions temporaires*. See *Muséographie* n.d. (1935).

²⁶⁷ Paul Alfassa, Julien Cain, Henri Focillon, Louis Hautcœur, René Huyghe, Jacques Jaujard, Raymond Lantier, Paul Lemoine, Louis Metman, Georges-Henri Rivière, and Paul Vitry all served on the organising committees for the both the “*Chefs d’œuvre de l’art français*” and “*Musées et Expositions*”, class III of group I (“*Expression de la pensée*”) in the programme of the *Exposition internationale*.

²⁶⁸ To coincide with the presentation, Huyghe co-ordinated a special issue of «L’Amour de l’art» in June dedicated to *La Muséographie à l’Exposition internationale*, with contributions by Germain Bazin, Louis Cheronnet and Georges-Henri Rivière.

grouping objects and endowing them with commentary, offered, he continued, new ways of producing meaning for the modern audience. Yet he was also wary of a «power all the more formidable because it is less visible»²⁶⁹, suggesting that too much “method”, or the wrong kind, also impinged upon the authority of the artwork. To fix upon the history of an object, Huyghe continued, was to eschew art itself in favour of the mark it leaves upon time²⁷⁰. Such reflections give some clue as to why, within the context of the “*Chefs d’œuvre de l’art français*”, he and his colleagues outwardly foreswore history in favour of art and placed their rhetorical focus upon the masterpiece. Its «eternal truth», according to Huyghe, was a «natural counterweight to the present, its practices, its partialities»²⁷¹.

When it opened on 25 June 1937, however, Georges Huisman did not attempt to deny the exhibition’s «systematic presentation of works»²⁷², nearly 1.300 objects, including some 430 paintings, which were carefully arranged chronologically in twenty-four galleries across two floors (fig. 14). Less a marvellous and relaxed promenade, the display proposed an itinerary to be followed, and while the show’s title emphasised the nature of the works as singular objects of wonder, the logic of their sequential display gave every “masterpiece” both sources and consequences²⁷³. From an early desire to «highlight our national antiquities»²⁷⁴ and lay claim to a tradition spanning two millenia, organisers assembled a group of Gallo-Roman bronze artefacts – neither strictly French, nor really masterpieces – in the small vestibule to the left of the entrance²⁷⁵. The first, long winding galleries (fig. 15) were then devoted to an array of tapestries, sculptures, ivories, wooden carvings, precious *orfèvreries*, and illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages, setting the scene for the paintings to follow. These objects, Huisman suggested, offered visitors access to an historical milieu and to «the men who had lived *dans un tel décor*»²⁷⁶, France’s first painters and the subjects of their portraits²⁷⁷. Many of the same fifteenth-century works seen five years earlier at Burlington House reappeared in rooms 6 and 7: the *Pietà* from Nouans was now given to Jean Fouquet²⁷⁸; the two panels from his *Diptyque de Melun* travelled again from

²⁶⁹ Huyghe 1937b, p. 781.

²⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 786.

²⁷¹ Ivi, p. 781.

²⁷² AN *Sous-série Beaux-Arts*, F/21/4729, transcript of a publicity segment for Radio Paris, 6:00pm, 22 February 1937.

²⁷³ See Bennett 1995, p. 45.

²⁷⁴ AN *Sous-série Beaux-Arts*, F/21/4082, organising committee meeting, 7 December 1936.

²⁷⁵ Herbert 1998, pp. 91-92.

²⁷⁶ *Chefs-d’œuvre de l’art français* 1937, p. X.

²⁷⁷ Huisman’s otherwise casual reference calls to mind Stephen Bann’s discussion of the different ways material objects were used in historical settings to evoke an image of the past in nineteenth-century France. See Bann 1984, p. 78 ff.

²⁷⁸ This attribution would not be universally accepted for another 50 years.

Antwerp and Berlin, but this time they flanked Nicolas Froment's *Triptyque du Buisson Ardent*, which the Cathédrale d'Aix-en-Provence had refused to lend to London in 1932. Enguerrand Quarton's *Couronnement de la Vierge*, which likewise had not left Avignon since the exhibition of "*Les Primitifs français*" in 1904, also figured. And while the number of works was small, they were applauded as «the best suited to show victoriously, definitively, the profound originality, the invention, the grace and the force of our French "Primitives"»²⁷⁹.

A selection of sixteenth century portraits by Corneille de Lyon and François Clouet in alveoli 8 and 9 led visitors onto *le grand siècle*, but while at Burlington House the two main pictorial tendencies of the era had been deliberately interwoven, here the seventeenth century was divided across galleries 10 and 12. «The painters of family life»²⁸⁰ and the French *caravaggesques* were to be found in the first room, those artists whose reputations, since London, had been materially enhanced by Jamot and Sterling's exhibition at the Orangerie in 1934. The three Le Nain brothers, Philippe de Champaigne and Georges de la Tour were all well represented. France's classical masters, Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin, followed in the next room, prefaced by a selection of their drawings in the outer alcove. Poussin's later, meditative landscapes figured prominently among the range of paintings on display²⁸¹. One of the strongest discursive threads to have emerged in London in 1932 was the equilibrium French painting maintained between the influences of North and South and their competing claims of "classical abstraction" and "realistic imitation"; or, as René Huyghe wrote now, reprising the same thread, its balance between «Italian art [...] so penetrated by the superiority of Man [...] and northern art [which] excessively inflates the physical forces of Nature»²⁸². Poussin's carefully observed scenes such as *Paysage avec Saint Matthieu et l'ange* and *Les cendres de Phocion remises par une femme de Mégare* clearly showed, according to Huyghe, that «the "form" over which [he] never ceased to muse was none other than this expressive *harmony* [...] of that which signified Man by his actions, and Nature by its aspects»²⁸³. So while the Norman painter may have «abandoned his homeland for Rome, he never abdicated his French personality»²⁸⁴. As a «living synthesis of the Latin character and the spirit of the

²⁷⁹ Lécuyer 1935.

²⁸⁰ Du Colombier 1937b.

²⁸¹ To this effect, the works chosen were from between 1648-51, representing what Anthony Blunt later described as the «the harmony of nature and the virtue of man», and not those executed in the last ten years of the artist life, when more and more Poussin had depicted not the order, but the awe-inspiring immensity of nature. See Blunt 1967, p. 272. The prominence of Poussin's landscape paintings was complemented by the choice of drawings preceding the display, which also favoured the artist's topographical sketches.

²⁸² Huyghe 1937, p. 3.

²⁸³ Ivi, p. 4.

²⁸⁴ Bazin 1937, p. 12.

North, of *classicism and naturalism*»²⁸⁵ his works, Waldemar George agreed, were made in the image of France.

From the seventeenth century onwards, French art «unfurled at a more and more rapid rate, reaching ever greater heights»²⁸⁶, an ascendancy visitors to the exhibition performed physically, as they climbed upstairs to continue through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Pierre du Colombier suggested that while «in London the balance had been lightly skewed in favour of the nineteenth century»²⁸⁷, here the display gave the opposite impression. It was certainly true that the show at the Royal Academy in 1932 had included a greater number of nineteenth-century paintings, an additional eighty works, and the representation of Impressionism and Postimpressionism had been particularly strong, due to the loan of key pieces from the local collection of Samuel Courtauld and other private, American collectors. Nineteenth-century artists still outnumbered their eighteenth-century predecessors at the Palais de Tokyo, and there were pieces of real quality. David's *Marat assassiné*, Delacroix's *Medée furieuse* and Corot's *Homère et les bergers*, the work the Musée de Saint-Lô had refused to send to London, were on show, as were Courbet's *La rencontre (Bonjour Monsieur Courbet!)*, Manet's *La femme au perroquet*, and Gauguin's *Ia Orana Maria*. There were no less than eleven works by Cézanne in gallery 23, presented as the spiritual heir to French classicism from his purported wish, oft-repeated at the time, to imbue Impressionism with gravitas and *refaire Poussin sur nature*. Douglas Lord suggested, however, that the selection was unequal, and while David and Ingres appeared «in all their splendour, the latter especially with *Jupiter et Thétis* [...] most of the [late nineteenth-century] painters [...] appear[ed] at their worst»²⁸⁸. Du Colombier agreed that the final rooms in which the Impressionists and Postimpressionists figured were «strangely and uselessly twisted»²⁸⁹. By comparison, in the largest and best spaces, the painting of the eighteenth century «was represented in unforgettable, spellbinding fashion»²⁹⁰. Gallery 18 offered the «apotheosis»²⁹¹ of Watteau, eleven works, including his lively depiction of a Parisian picture gallery, the monumental *L'enseigne de Gersaint*, diplomatically lent for the occasion by Berlin's Schloss Charlottenburg²⁹². This painting, as James Herbert

²⁸⁵ George 1937, pp. 23-24.

²⁸⁶ Besson 1937.

²⁸⁷ Du Colombier 1937a.

²⁸⁸ Lord 1937.

²⁸⁹ Du Colombier 1937a.

²⁹⁰ Lécuyer 1937.

²⁹¹ *Ibidem*.

²⁹² Curiously, there is no mention of this particular work in the archived material regarding French requests for loans. In a letter to the French Ambassador in Berlin, André François-Poncet, dated 5 February, in preparation for Huyghe's visit to the German capital, Georges Huisman specified five works by Watteau (*La leçon d'amour, Danse d'enfants, Comédiens italiens, L'amour paisible, Assemblé dans un parc*), but not *L'enseigne de Gersaint*. Neither was it mentioned in the

eloquently argues, embodied the familiar premise of French equilibrium and continuity, incorporating the drama and scale of seventeenth-century classicism and the intimacy and humour of eighteenth-century genre scenes²⁹³. In gallery 19 visitors moved on to the «poetry and verve»²⁹⁴ of Fragonard's nimble touches and discovered the dignity Chardin brought to familiar, domestic scenes in *Dame cachetant une lettre* and *La maîtresse d'école*. By infusing unlikely subjects with grandeur through the highest standards of painting, Chardin similarly «integrate[d] into classical art all of that old French heritage of the painters of reality»²⁹⁵.

The exhibition was a public triumph in France, personally for the beleaguered Blum, whose role was acknowledged – «let us be just now»²⁹⁶ – even in the right-wing «Candide». In contrast to the polarised reactions the *Exposition internationale* aroused domestically, the retrospective at the Palais de Tokyo inspired the same critical platitudes the length of the political spectrum. For the Fascist-sympathiser Lucien Rebatet it concretely showed that «French art benefits from a continuity that none of its neighbours possesses [...] and a profound unity its variety»²⁹⁷. The art historian Elie Faure, in the Communist organ «L'Humanité», similarly signalled «the continuity of French art [...] as giving it its own physiognomy», a countenance born of its «power to balance reason and sensibility»²⁹⁸. Such claims of “continuous tradition” are central to national histories of art and their display, Matthew Rampley suggests, because they promote the sense of the nation as a lasting and stable vehicle of cultural identity²⁹⁹. Unsurprisingly, then, few contemporary critics probed the exhibition's strategies of display too closely to find the source of its unity and Raymond Bouyer in «La Revue de l'art ancien et moderne» was alone in remarking organisers' «flagrant fondness for the painters of life»³⁰⁰, a selection of works in which the famous balance of French painting was actually tipped in favour of “realistic imitation” over “classical abstraction”. Herein lay the key to the «very particular familial air»³⁰¹ which seemed to suffuse the spaces of the Palais de Tokyo, a display in which Louis Le Nain's *Repas de Paysan* anticipated Manet's *Le Bon Bock*, in which the atmospheric delicacy of Claude's *Le Château enchanté* prepared the way for Corot's *Vue de Mantes-la-Jolie*, and

minutes of the committee meeting on 8 March 1937, following Huyghe's return (in which it was noted that the Germans agreed in principle to all loans requested), suggesting the possibility that the work was proposed by German authorities. AN *Sous-série Beaux-Arts*, F/21/4729.

²⁹³ Herbert 1998, pp. 94-98.

²⁹⁴ Lécuyer 1937.

²⁹⁵ Lassaingne 1937, p. 375.

²⁹⁶ Du Colombier 1937a.

²⁹⁷ Rebatet 1937, p. 447.

²⁹⁸ Faure 1937.

²⁹⁹ Rampley 2012, p. 246.

³⁰⁰ Bouyer 1937, p. 165.

³⁰¹ Barotte 1937.

in which the domestic intimacy of Chardin's *L'écureuse* reappeared a century-and-a-half later in Edgar Degas's *Les repasseuses*.

The claim to continuity necessarily reduces historical complexity, frequently demanding a choice of paintings that are atypical of an artist's œuvre – Poussin the *paysagiste* – and in the context of the “*Chefs d'œuvre de l'art français*” this was even more apparent in gallery 20, where the great Neoclassicists and Romantics of the early nineteenth century were largely represented by their portraiture. David's *Portrait du flûtiste François Devienne* and *La Marachère* hung alongside Théodore Géricault's sympathetic image of *La Folle* and his study of *Lord Byron*; Jean-Antoine Gros's *Portrait de Mme Recamier* was next to Ingres' *Madame Moitessier* and the charming *La Belle Zélie*, which, in addition to Fouquet's *Vierge*, was the “face” of exhibition posters (fig. 16). The selection served to reinforce, as Bouyer remarked, that they «were portraitists too, these painters of history, adulators of Rome and Greece, and portraitists above all, in the eyes of our contemporaries»³⁰². Organisers, in other words, focused upon examples in which the artists seemed to relinquish or renounce their own classical doctrines or romantic ideals in order to observe the idiosyncrasies of their real, individual subjects with probity and care. From here there emerged a second, related conviction in critical literature about the nature of the French art, led by the display: that every truly great artist was also an individual who, at some point, flouted convention and found himself excluded from academic tradition; that for some three hundred years true French painting had been the preserve of «*non-conformists*, of rebels [...] each pursuing in his own way his need for perfection»³⁰³. In the final, winding galleries of the Palais de Tokyo, in the absence once again of their forgotten academic peers, a group of nineteenth-century recalcitrants – Géricault and Delacroix, Corot and Courbet, Manet and Degas, Cézanne, Renoir and Monet – brought French art to its celestial heights, in a timely reminder to other nations, according to Maurice Raynal, that art's progress depended above all on individual originality, and never grew from collectively enforced practices³⁰⁴.

While French critics were universal in their admiration, the responses that the exhibition excited outside France were ambivalent. Annamaria Ducci, for example, has recently addressed what amounted to Italy's critical boycott of the show. Following the victory of the Popular Front and the intensifying political situation in Europe, the *sœurs latines* were increasingly estranged and the few Italian critics who broke the pointed silence viewed the “*Chefs d'œuvre de l'art français*” through this lens of ideological disaffection. When Ugo Ojetti finally published a short review in «*Corriere della Sera*» in late October, he emphasised that the works on show at the Palais de Tokyo lacked unity and

³⁰² Bouyer 1937, p. 168.

³⁰³ Gillet 1937, pp. 281-282.

³⁰⁴ Raynal 1937, p. 26.

consistency, proving that the development of French art was disjointed, based upon a series of shocks very much «linked to the changing social and political life»³⁰⁵. Ojetti's compatriot, Giuseppe Delogu spoke more enthusiastically of the incomparable heights that French artists reached in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but he too attributed much of their creative power to a life lived in a state of «bloody torment» and «constant uproar»³⁰⁶. «What is really pictured here», he continued, «is the face of France in every moment of her life, of her troubled, stunning and dramatic history»³⁰⁷. The English writer Winifred Boulter proved more receptive to the «continuity» of the display, remarking both the exhibition's «extraordinary homogeneity», and the way French painting seemed to follow «a logical, harmonious progression, from the work of the early primitives to that of Cézanne»³⁰⁸. «The whole collection», she enthused, «leaves one breathless in admiration»³⁰⁹. Her compatriot Douglas Lord was less effusive in «The Burlington Magazine», and while he acknowledged the selection was generally very good, he saw little to distinguish it from the show in 1932, suggesting to his readers that the greater part of the works on display had been seen recently in England³¹⁰. The Germans, like the Italians, largely ignored the exhibition, although exceptionally Paul Wescher, then exiled in Paris, wrote a review for «Pantheon». On the one hand, he emphasised the elitism of the French painting, claiming «France has never had a popular art»³¹¹, all the while admiring the early unified, national consciousness which had underpinned its «great line of development». Invoking Henri Focillon's poetic description from the pages of the exhibition catalogue, Wescher reiterated that while «the centuries might colour the surface differently, they have never changed the substance; the language remains the same, even as its expression develops from one stage to the next»³¹².

«We have attempted too our portrait of France»³¹³, Focillon had explained in his introduction to the «*Chefs d'œuvre de l'art français*». The masterpieces on show, he continued, represented the «eternal relevance» of France's cultural heritage, and by extension France herself, in comparison to «intensity of the moment» then on display – and how – along the banks of the Seine³¹⁴. Only a short distance away from the Palais de Tokyo, the pavilions of Germany and the

³⁰⁵ U. Ojetti, *Pittura francese*, «Corriere della Sera», 24 October 1937, p. 3. Cited in Ducci 2015, p. 397.

³⁰⁶ G. Delogu, *Cronache delle esposizioni in Europa*, «Critica d'arte», 2, 1937, p. 257. Cited in Ducci 2015, p. 414.

³⁰⁷ Ivi, p. 413.

³⁰⁸ Boulter 1937.

³⁰⁹ *Ibidem*.

³¹⁰ Lord 1937.

³¹¹ Wescher 1937, p. 279.

³¹² Ivi, p. 280.

³¹³ *Chefs-d'œuvre de l'art français* 1937, p. XIII.

³¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

Soviet Union confronted one another across the fairgrounds of the *Exposition internationale* (fig. 17), mirroring the clash of Fascism and Communism on the world stage and offering a visual metaphor for France's own existential crisis. The symbol of its capital, the Eiffel Tower, an ageing monument to a bygone fair and era of prosperity, now stood ineffectually between the monumental effigies of two newly-invigorated twentieth-century regimes³¹⁵. In the face of these belligerent rivals, Blum's government had invested in the nation's art both to bolster its own image and as a civilising force. The exhibition reflected a persistent, humanistic conviction among key intellectuals in France that culture, and the arts in particular, could function as a civic antidote to unrestrained nationalism, even as their own understanding of what constituted culture remained patriotically determined. As Georges Huisman declared, for the duration of the *Expo* the Palais de Tokyo was to be «a reliquary of French humanism [...] where each will sample, as he pleases, the lessons of an art [...] that remains, at the forefront of European civilisation, an incomparable instrument of reconciliation and peace»³¹⁶. By the time the “*Chefs d'œuvre de l'art français*” closed on 30 November 1937, more than 650.000 people had passed through it, a record number for any exhibition in any country, the committee claimed³¹⁷. But only two years later, those same visitors learnt the true consequences of Europe's cultural diplomacy-cum-*braggadocio* in the 1930's, and as the world again descended into war the limits of art as an instrument of unity and peace were all too apparent.

5. Conclusion

The general chauvinism that suffused the study, display and critical appreciation of art in France and Italy during the interwar period came to the fore in a myriad of ways during the course of these four retrospective exhibitions. The many bureaucrats, museum professionals, art historians and critics who were willingly co-opted to the state-mandated task of promoting their respective cultural identities, be it at home or abroad, commonly laid claim to an unbroken chain of historical development. Antonio Muñoz, in his review of the show at the Petit Palais in 1935, extolled the «continuous bond

³¹⁵ Kaplan 1986, p. 128-129.

³¹⁶ Huisman 1937. I read Huisman's reference to “humanism” here in relation to his belief that France remained a beacon of humanistic values, specifically man's capacity for self-realisation through reason. The term, however, was wielded along the length of the political spectrum and carried clear Fascist overtones in the criticism of figures like Waldemar George. See Herbert 1998, p. 112.; cfr. Affron 1997 p. 190; see also Ducci 2015, p. 395.

³¹⁷ AN *Sous-série Beaux-Arts*, F/21/4729, Final report, “*Chefs d'œuvre de l'art français*”, Direction des Musées Nationaux, 24 January 1938, p. 12.

throughout the centuries uniting all these creations, at once so different and yet so bluntly and obviously Italian», even as he acknowledged that it was «difficult to say exactly what this unity comprises»³¹⁸. According to most of his Italian compatriots, such continuity generally depended upon a self-referential tradition gloriously free of external influences. In presenting Italy's contribution to the nineteenth-century in London in 1930, for example, Ugo Ojetti had insisted that the «French impressionists [...] had not touched to any degree the fancy of [modern] Italian landscape painters»³¹⁹. The long-standing sense of artistic rivalry between France and Italy that Ojetti's posturing clearly projected had, once upon a time, charged French scholarship. Throughout the nineteenth century debate had raged in France as to whether the arrival of Italian classicism in the sixteenth century marked the blossoming or the deterioration of French painting. By the 1930's, however, French art historians and critics were adopting a more reconciliatory – but still patriotic – stance. In contrast to their Italian counterparts, they confidently based their premise of unity and continuity upon the ability of French artists to absorb «foreign influences as the very breath of life»³²⁰. «When such influences fall upon the soil of a sufficiently robust national temperament», explained Pierre du Colombier, in the lead up to the French exhibition in London in 1932, «it assimilates them and transforms them»³²¹. «An “influence”», agreed René Huyghe, «does not imply for [France] the peril of plagiarism, but the possibility of development»³²². While such viewpoints may seem par for the course in the decade before the Second World War, both Donald Preziosi and Matthew Rampley emphasise the surprising resilience of art history's topographies³²³. Charting the jingoistic heights of the 1930's is also a chance to reflect upon how and why old national myths – or even new ones – continue to cast their shadow over the study of cultural heritage.

While these grandiose displays of French and Italian art were unquestionably a consequence of escalating nationalism in Europe between the wars, in purely practical terms such events equally relied upon widening channels of international collaboration. The recurring cast of characters who assembled and presented the shows, and the multiple roles played by such figures as Huyghe and Ojetti, demonstrate the way that museum, art-historical and critical circles overlapped within increasingly professionalised, international networks. The success of events hung upon the strength of contacts and connections behind the scenes, between institutions, and across national borders. Michela Passini, in comparing different national showings of early modern painting at the turn

³¹⁸ A. Muñoz, *Arte italiana a Parigi. La mostra al Petit Palais e quella al Jeu de Paume*, «Note e Rassegne», 1 June 1935, cited in Salvatore 2014, pp. 181-182.

³¹⁹ *Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200-1900* 1930, p. XXX.

³²⁰ *Enquête sur l'art français* 1935, p. 181.

³²¹ *Ibidem*.

³²² Ivi, p. 187.

³²³ Preziosi 2003, p. 36; Rampley 2012, p. 235.

of the century, indeed argues that such large-scale exhibitions reveal the way nationalist discourse on art and identity, more than coinciding with, depended upon the internationalisation of culture and the global circulation of museum objects and expertise³²⁴, a process that only accelerated after the First World War. In 1926, Henri Focillon was instrumental in founding the International Museums Office, under the auspices of the League of Nations³²⁵. He argued that museums, in displaying together «the genius of the nation and that of foreign civilisations», had sketched «the first outline of a European and global consciousness» and were as such «the natural means of peaceful, international cooperation»³²⁶. The exhibitions staged in London and Paris between 1930 and 1937, particularly in bringing together examples of the nation's art that were not part of the state's collections, took place against this backdrop of formal exchange and borrowed from the same script of cultural diplomacy. Firstly, the masterpieces of the national school that populated the world's museums were celebrated as perpetual envoys, or, as Jean Zay wrote in 1937, «the interpreters and emissaries of our national genius in the universe»³²⁷. Secondly, the act of reuniting these works through amicable international loans became itself an instrument of peace and reconciliation. As one French critic was moved to ask in 1935, «if Mussolini and Italy, if Europe and the New World all believed in war, would they be sending their Venuses and Madonnas into battle?»³²⁸. Such (misplaced) hopes surely informed the display at the Palais de Tokyo two years later, when organisers hung Poussin's *Tancredè et Herminie* from Leningrad's Hermitage Museum next to *L'Empire de Flore* from Dresden's Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, even as their respective lenders "faced-off" against each other a short distance away.

If the political symbolism of these vast enterprises was continually brought to the public's attention, the mundane, logistical aspects of their organisation were habitually veiled, and «everything was accomplished as if by magic»³²⁹. The sense of magic, Francis Haskell observes, has been instrumental in the ascendancy of temporary exhibitions in the present day and age³³⁰. The heightened emotion surrounding ephemeral displays in the 1930's not only stemmed from the intensity of nationalist sentiments, but a more general awareness that the enchantment was short-lived and never to be replicated. «At last we have before our eyes beauties of which we have dreamed», wrote T.W. Earp in 1930, «an experience which a lifetime of travelling could hardly

³²⁴ Passini 2010b, p. 29.

³²⁵ The International Museums Office (IOM) fell under the umbrella of the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation (IICI). For more on the creation of the IOM and the work of the IICI during the interwar period see Ducci 2012, p. 235 and ff.

³²⁶ Focillon 1927, p. 4.

³²⁷ *Chefs-d'œuvre de l'art français* 1937, p. VIII.

³²⁸ Brousson 1935, p. 2.

³²⁹ Hazard 1935, p. 7.

³³⁰ Haskell 2000, p. 6.

recreate»³³¹. When the same beauties gathered again at the Petit Palais in 1935, Louis Hourticq described the unrepeatable extravaganza as a display to end all displays: «the period of the moving masterpiece is over»³³². This has patently not been the case and the “magic” persists. The study of historical exhibitions, particularly those staged in the feverish period between the wars, invites us to look more closely at the different interests which continue to mobilise art today as “soft” power: the ever-present competition between countries, cities and institutions; the delicate negotiations which still underpin cultural exchange. As a last, salient example, when the *Madonna Litta* travelled from the Soviet Union to the Petit Palais in Paris in 1935, there were already doubts about its authorship, and while it was given to the artist, it was listed last among his catalogued works with the proviso that «this painting has always *passed* for a work by Leonardo da Vinci»³³³. «It is not by Leonardo», Nello Tarchiani insisted, but he explained to his Italian readers that it was displayed as such, because to «ask for it, and have it come from Leningrad, only to renounce it, would be stupidly rude»³³⁴. When the same painting left the Hermitage again in 2011, this time bound for the National Gallery in London for another blockbuster, “Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan”, it was once more attributed to the artist, which, one scholar remarked suggestively at the time, «was presumably a condition of the loan»³³⁵. *Plus ça change*, as the French might say.

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³³¹ Earp 1930, p. 414.

³³² Hourticq 1935, p. 16.

³³³ *Exposition de l'Art italien 1935*, p. 106.

³³⁴ Tarchiani 1935b, p. 46.

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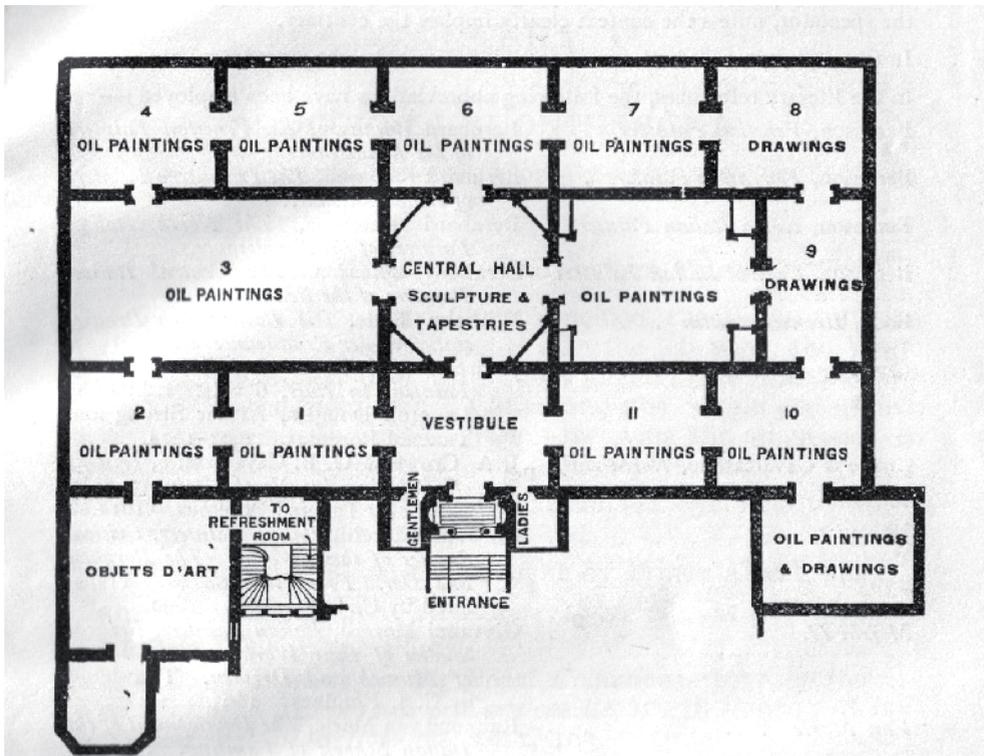
Appendix



Fig. 1. Large-format poster for the “Chefs d’œuvre de l’art français” in Paris, 1937, showing Jean Fouquet’s *La Vierge et l’enfant*, one half of his *Diptyque de Melun*, lent by the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp for the occasion. Colour lithograph, 118x75 cm. Bibliothèque Nationale de France



Fig. 2. Bernardo Pernice [Bernard Patridge], *Mussolini the Magnificent*, cartoon from *Punch*, 18 December 1929



PLAN OF THE GALLERIES

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| I. 14th and 15th Century—all Schools. | VI. 16th Century Venetian. | X. 17th Century—all Schools. |
| II. 15th Century—all Schools. | VII. 16th Century—all Schools. | XI. 17th and 18th Century—all Schools. |
| III. Late 15th and 16th Century—all Schools. | VIII. Drawings, Florentine and Umbrian. | Architectural Room—18th Century Venetian. |
| IV. Late 15th and 16th Century—all Schools. | IX. Drawings, Venetian and Other Schools. | Lecture Room—Modern Painters. |
| V. 15th Century Venetian and North Italian. | | South Room—Objets d' Art and Paintings. |

Fig. 3. Plan of galleries at the "Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200-1900", at the Royal Academy, January-March, 1930, included as page XXIII of the main catalogue



Fig. 4. Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *The Finding of Moses*, from the National Gallery of Scotland, reunited with the section (right), *A Halberdier*, lent from a private collection in Paris, and reproduced in *Italian Art. An Illustrated Souvenir of the Exhibition of Italian Art at Burlington House, London*, London: William Clowes and Sons, 1930, p. 85

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CONTENTS OF GALLERIES

1. IXth to XVIth Centuries. Paintings, Tapestries, Sculpture, Objets d'Art and Manuscripts
2. XIVth to XVIIth Centuries. Paintings, Sculpture and Goldsmiths' Work
3. XVth to XVIIIth Centuries. Paintings and Sculpture
4. XVIIth Century. Paintings and Sculpture
5. XVIIIth and XVIIIth Centuries. Paintings
6. XVIIIth Century. Paintings
7. XVIIIth and XIXth Centuries. Paintings and Sculpture
8. XIXth Century. Paintings and Sculpture
9. XIXth Century. Paintings and Sculpture
10. XIXth Century. Paintings
11. XIXth Century. Paintings

Vestibule. Paintings

Central Hall. IXth-XVIth Centuries. Sculpture, Tapestries and Objets d'Art

Lecture Room. XVIIIth Century. Paintings, Sculpture, Tapestries, Furniture and Porcelain

Architectural Room. Drawings, Goldsmiths' Work and Manuscripts

South Rooms. Drawings, Paintings and Sculpture

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PLAN OF GALLERIES

THE REFRESHMENT ROOM
(OPEN FROM 9.30 A.M. TO 6 P.M.)
IS REACHED BY THE STAIRCASE FROM THE SOUTH ROOMS

Fig. 5. Contents and plan of the galleries at the "Exhibition of French Art, 1200-1900", at the Royal Academy, January-March 1932, included as pages XXXII and XXIII of the main catalogue



Fig. 6. Installation photograph of the “Exhibition of French Art, 1200-1900” at the Royal Academy of Arts, 1932. Gallery II (paintings) showing, amongst other things *A Lady in her Bath* (*Diane de Poitiers*) by François Clouet and *The Triptych of Moulins* by the Maître de Moulins

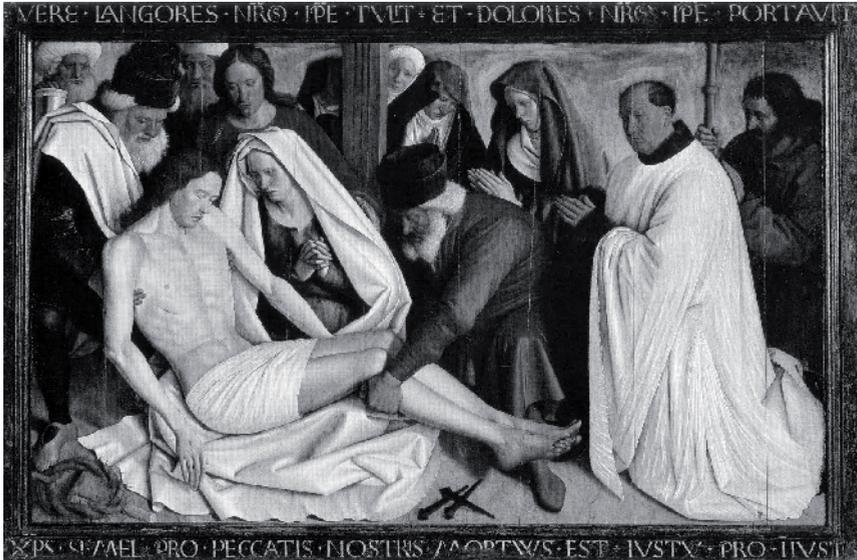


Fig. 7. Jean Fouquet, *La Pietà de Nouans*, c. from the Church of Saint-Martin in Nouans, catalogued for the “Exhibition of French Art, 1200-1900” as n. 46, School of Fouquet, *Descente de Croix* (*The Descent from the Cross*)



415 RENOIR

Samuel Courtauld

THE OPERA BOX

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Fig. 8. Auguste Renoir, *La Loge (The Opera Box)*, lent by Samuel Courtauld, reproduced in *French Art. An Illustrated Souvenir of the French of Italian Art at Burlington House, London*, London: William Clowes and Sons, 1932, p. 67



Fig. 9. Leonardo da Vinci, *La Madonna Litta* (pl. 88), lent to the exhibition “L’Art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo”, by the Hermitage Museum, Leningrad, reproduced in *L’Art Italien*, Paris: Librairie Plon, 1935, n.p.

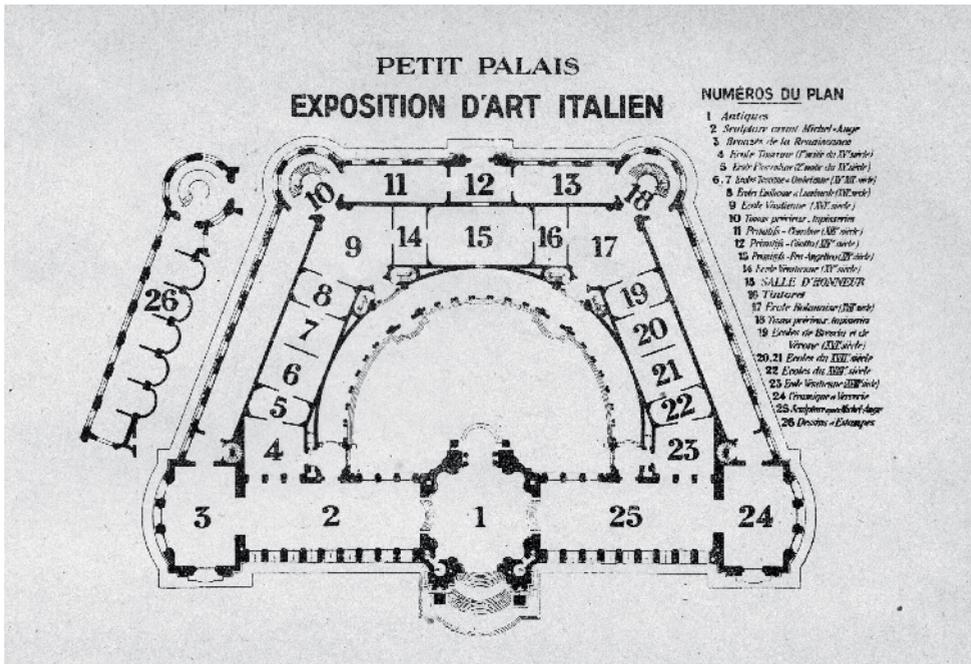


Fig. 10. Plan of galleries at the exhibition “L’Art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo”, at the Petit Palais, Paris, May-July 1935, included in the main catalogue (n.p.)



Fig. 11. Photograph of the facade of the Petit Palais, on the day of inauguration of the exhibition “L’Art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo”, 16 May 1935

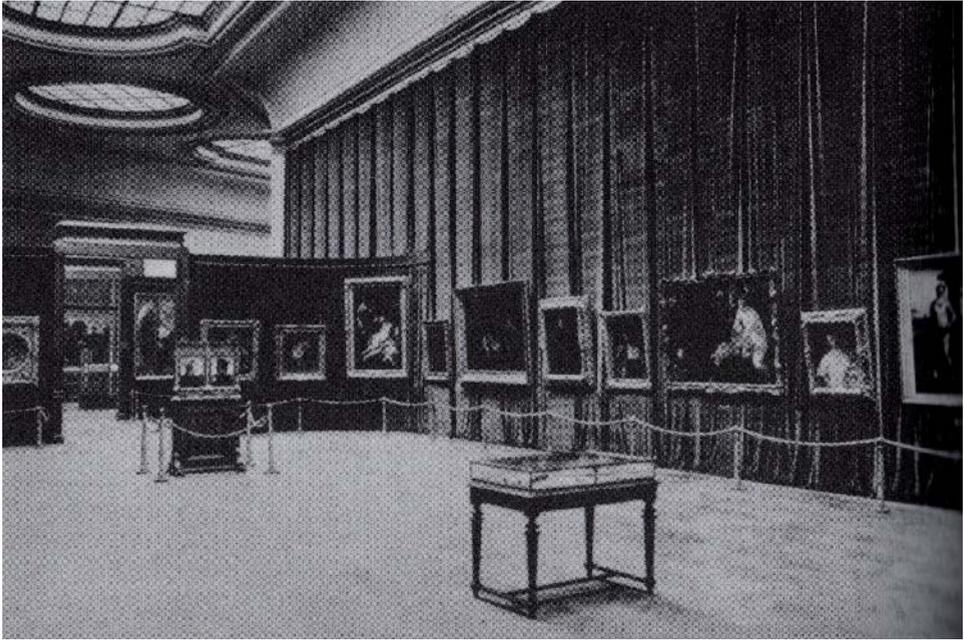
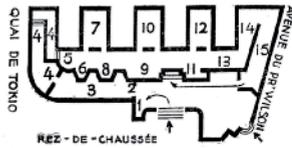


Fig. 12. Installation photograph of the “L’Art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo” at the Petit Palais, Paris, 1935. Salle 15 (paintings), *tribune de gloire*, showing, amongst other things *Judith* by Giorgione and *Flora* by Titian



La « Naissance de Vénus », par Botticelli

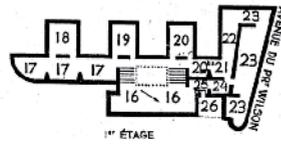
Fig. 13. *The Birth of Venus* by Botticelli, caricature of Pierre Laval in «La Bête Noire», June 1935



REZ-DE-CHAUSSÉE

- SALLE 1. Art gallo-romain.
 SALLE 2. Sculptures et tapisseries.
 SALLE 3. Art mérovingien. Orfèvreries, sculptures, tapisseries, manuscrits du moyen âge.
 SALLE 4. Tapisseries, manuscrits du XV^e siècle.
 SALLE 5. Tapisseries des XV^e et XVI^e siècles.
 SALLE 6. Peintures et dessins des XIV^e et XV^e siècles.
 SALLE 7. Les Primatifs : Le Maître de l'Assommoir d'Alsie ; Nicolas Froment ; Jean Fouquet ; Le Maître de Meulins ; Dellegambe.
 SALLE 8. Corneille de Lyon ; les Clouet.
 SALLE 9. Dessins des XIV^e, XV^e et XVI^e siècles.
 SALLE 10. Peintures des XVI^e et XVII^e siècles : L'École de Fontainebleau ; les Le Nain G. de La Tour ; Ph. de Champaigne ; Le Sueur.
 SALLE 11. Dessins des XVI^e et XVII^e siècles.
 SALLE 12. Peintures du XVII^e siècle : Claude Gellée ; Poussin ; Rigaud ; Mignard ; La Bruyn ; Vivien.
 SALLE 13. Dessins du XVII^e siècle.
 SALLE 14. Peintures du XVII^e siècle : Jouvenet ; Le Ponce ; Largillière ; de Troy.
 SALLE 15. Tapisseries, argenterie, mobilier du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle.

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PREMIER ÉTAGE

- SALLE 16. Peintures, sculptures, dessins du XVII^e siècle.
 SALLE 17. Peintures et dessins du XVIII^e siècle : M. Quentin de La Tour.
 SALLE 18. Peintures : Watteau ; Lancret ; Boucher ; Greux ; Ponceaux ; Pater ; Tocqué.
 SALLE 19. Peintures : Nattier ; Fragonard ; Chardin ; Saint-Aubin ; Duplessis ; Vigée-Lebrun.
 SALLE 20/20 bis. David ; Gros ; Boffa ; Gérardot.
 SALLE 21. Ingres ; Delacroix ; Chassériau ; Prud'hon.
 SALLE 22. Courbet ; Daubigny ; Daubigny.
 SALLE 23. Millet ; Rousseau ; Corot ; Manet ; Monet ; Berthe Morisot ; Sisley ; Chassan ; Renoir ; Degas ; Pissarro ; Gauguin ; Seurat ; Toulouse-Lautrec.
 SALLES 24-25. Dessins du XIX^e siècle.
 SALLE 26. Gravures, estampes.

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Fig. 14. Plan of galleries at the exhibition “Chefs d’œuvre de l’art français”, at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, June-November 1937, included as pages 24-25 of the *Guide topographique*



Fig. 15. Installation photograph of the “Chefs d’œuvre de l’art français” at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 1937, Salle 4 (tapestries and manuscripts from the fifteenth century)



Fig. 16. Small-format poster for the “Chefs d’œuvre de l’art français” in Paris, 1937, showing Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’s *La Belle Zélie*, lent by the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen for the occasion. Colour lithograph, 72x51 cm



Fig. 17. Postcard of the fairgrounds of the “Exposition internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne”, Paris, 1937, view from the terrace of the Trocadéro, showing the German pavilion by Albert Speer (left) and the Soviet Pavilion by Boris Iofan (right)

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