French Classicism in the 1950s:
The Annual Prix de Rome Competition at the National School of Fine Arts

D r. L i n d a S t r a t f o r d

In an article entitled “No Abstract Art before Age Forty,” Frenchman Jean Souverbie, National School of Fine Arts professor and Institut member, decried mid-century abstract painting practices taken up by young artists-in-training. Souverbie calculated the risks of abandoning classical norms. Painting was, after all, a language:

Every painter seeks, above all, individuality. Alas! More often than not this ends up in nebulous subjectivity. It is this excess of subjectivity (derived from nothing more than incompetence) which I condemn, because at this time, painting is becoming incommunicable.¹

Professors such as Souverbie and others at the highest level of art instruction in France in the decade following World War II often expressed their concern that avant-garde practices would fail to promote “what we have in common,” that work associated primarily with the artist’s interior subjectivity would negate lessons of the French classical past. Commenting on contemporary challenges in 1963, Ecole Polytechnique Drawing Instructor, Jacques Derry, opined that students must show respect for the past, in a merging of sense and sensibility combining “l’intelligence purifiée” and “la sensibilité contrôlée.”²

Classical standards for the arts in France, institutionalized in the seventeenth century by Louis XIV’s Academy, indeed did persist for centuries within the French National School of Fine Arts. Instructors charged students to preserve the spirit of French classicism, a spirit strikingly evinced in the school’s annual Prix de Rome competition, which served as a prime vehicle by which classical standards remained dominant. Not until 1961 did an abstract, nonfigurative entry significantly breaching classical norms win the coveted Prix de Rome. Stylistic practices taken from pre-modern painting, as a review of the annual Prix de Rome competition at the French National School will demonstrate, pointed to the lingering weight of an officially recognized classical style in France well through the mid-twentieth century.

Tradition at mid-century

The charge to remain true to lessons of the past was a subject much discussed in France in the post-World War II period. In the decade following the Liberation, French society experienced considerable strain as the French wrestled with the “crise identitaire” resulting from rapid social change, economic modernization and attendant fears of Americanization. The challenges of postwar recovery, social and political instability, and issues of national sovereignty stemming from the German Occupation, and continued American military presence, contributed to the growing sense of crisis. All of these factors affirmed the felt need for the subsistence of a native French artistic tradition based on enduring classical attributes.

Robust classical training characterized the curriculum at the most prestigious school of fine arts in the nation, the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (ENSBA) in Paris. The National School of Fine Arts was established in 1816 as a neoclassical school of art instruction, emphasizing the study of classical antiquities as models. Comparable to other elite institutions of higher learning outside of the university system known as the Grandes Écoles, the school traced its origins to

Above: 1956 Prix de Rome winning entry:
Henri Thomas, Jeunes filles sortant de la mer
no medium listed, no dimensions provided

Right: 1928 Prix de Rome winning entry:
Nicolas Unietseller, Concert champêtre
no medium listed, no dimensions provided

Photos: © Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, France
the Academy of Painting and Sculpture, the official school of painting established by Louis XIV in 1648. The collection of the Academy of Painting and Sculpture, made up largely of copies of important paintings and sculptures of the Italian Renaissance, was housed at the ENSBA, allowing students to master classical norms by copying Renaissance paintings and Roman busts. A growing system of official training, centered in Paris, incorporated regional centers as well, all under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education’s Beaux Arts division. By the mid-twentieth century, seven national fine arts schools existed throughout France as did over fifty municipal schools of art instruction. Instructors within the national system were appointed by the Fine Arts instructional division of the Ministry of Education, and members of the Academy of Fine Arts (Académie des Beaux Arts, housed within the Institut de France) also exerted authority in the national fine arts schools, participating on admissions juries and awarding prizes. Ties to the Academy ensured that traditional, classical approaches stemming from practices derived from the time of Louis XIV – the lessons of Poussin and Ingres – would be maintained, amounting to what was recognized as “the defense of a particular aesthetic doctrine.” Official state instruction in painting, as carried out through the national schools, thus generated artists well trained in French classicism, artists who had for years copied busts, portraits, religious scenes, and draped figures based on antiquity and Renaissance models.

Alternatives to official instruction in painting could be found in the “Académies libres,” such as the l’Académie de la Grande Chaumière (early 20th-century school in Montparnasse) and in private artists’ studios, where greater stylistic and technical innovation was encouraged. A clear distinction existed between the aesthetic approaches of official Beaux Arts institutions, conservative and classical in nature, and non-traditional, non-governmental institutions or private training studios. Furthermore, the national schools chose to conserve fundamental values when challenged to modernize. In a report acknowledging the 1948 tricentennial of the ENSBA in Paris, Director Nicolas Untersteller acknowledged the school’s roots in Louis XIV’s Academy of Painting and Sculpture. Citing plans to invigorate and modernize the curriculum, including choosing instructors from among noted contemporary artists, Untersteller firmly underscored the overriding importance of maintaining French aesthetic tradition.4

Untersteller participated in an early 1950s government commission appointed to reexamine art instruction in France, led by Jacques Jaujard, Secretary General of the Ministry of State in charge of Cultural Affairs. Commission members noted that state-sponsored art instruction maintained its emphasis on sketches from nature, Greek busts, live models, still lifes, landscapes, and portraits, while art schools in America pioneered areas of industrial aesthetics, film, and television. In several sessions over the course of the 1950s the commission addressed the possibility of curriculum reform within the national system of fine arts instruction in France. Several members suggested the creation of an industrial design segment that would allow students to explore graphic design, film, and television. However, the suggestion failed to elicit consensus within the committee.5 Instead, committee efforts in the 1950s centered on extending instructional norms to provincial schools throughout France, devising common programs throughout the nation, and implementing standard requirements for the Diplôme National des Beaux-Arts. Reforms taken up by
the committee failed to truly address the issue of modernization of fine arts instruction in France. Rather, emphasis was placed upon measures that would ensure national consensus through classical norms.

**Prix de Rome**

Nowhere was the adherence to classical academic standards more stubbornly promoted than in the annual Prix de Rome competition held at the National Fine Arts School in Paris. A jury of ENSBA professors, state-appointed artists and members of the Académie des Beaux Arts awarded this annual prize of three years and four months of study in Rome to a student displaying exceptional talent through a submission piece. Prix de Rome recipients could expect fame, ready-made careers, and access to government commissions following their sojourn in Rome, often receiving important posts in the national system of fine arts instruction, likely becoming professors and fine arts school directors themselves. The culmination of this sort of career was often a seat in the Institute.

The idea of the Prix de Rome competition originated with Louis XIV, who established an art studio in Rome where young artists were sent “in the service of the king” to copy antique statues, vases, and paintings for display at Versailles. “Transporting Rome to Paris was the primary goal of the founding of the school in Rome.” The practice of copying classical Greek, Roman and Renaissance pieces was meant to instill classical taste and support the classical doctrine of official fine arts instruction in France. In Rome, the young recipient would continue to “cultivate his taste” through exposure to antiquities and classical works.

Because Prix de Rome juries were composed of Academy members, state-appointed artists and ENSBA professors, winning submissions demonstrated the aesthetic values of conservative state institutions—aesthetic and classical in nature. A review of winning entries reveals this to be true. Nicolas Untersteller, ENSBA Director mentioned above, won the Prix de Rome in 1928 after studying under Paul-Albert Laurens. His work, *Concert champêtre* (figure 1), evoked the sixteenth-century Italianate tradition in a painting depicting figures in poetic landscape. This traditional theme aligned his work with harmonious scenes from Titian as well as the more recent Puvis de Chavannes and allowed the would-be recipient to demonstrate his skill in depicting the human body, a mandate of classical, academic training. In Untersteller’s piece, a Venus-like nude figure strikes a contrapposto pose reminiscent of Greek statuary. Equally important are references to agricultural peasant identities aligning the entry with native French spirit as a young peasant child plays a pipe, guarded by a suitably maternal figure with modest gaze and appearance, and a rural couple in traditional garb crossing French farmland. In this entry Untersteller demonstrated both his mastery of the human body and his mastery of the allegorical figure in landscape.

Similar conventions continued in the period 1945-1960. Rather than engagement with the cosmopolitan world of Paris studios outside the walls of the school, the 1945 prize-winning entry by Pierre Guenot, *Les vertus théologales* (figure 3) demonstrated little divorce with the past. Guenot, a student of Louis Roger, depicted two classically robed angels escorting a maiden to heaven. The piece strikingly alludes to divine encounter and spiritual transcendence, heavily religious, allegorical, and moralizing in tone. An overt-the-top religious sentimentality may be traced to wartime

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Above left: 1945 Prix de Rome winning entry  
Pierre Guenot, *Les vertus théologales*  
no medium listed, no dimensions provided

Above right: 1955 Prix de Rome winning entry  
Paul Ambille, *Décoration pour une salle des mariages*  
no medium listed, no dimensions provided

Photos: © Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, France
context, a reminder of the recent aesthetic "call to order" carried out by both German Occupation authorities and Vichy. However, successful entries following the Liberation show similar continuities. The 1946 Prix de Rome recipient, Joseph Fabrikan's Le sacrifice de Mithra, continued the appeal to an educated spectator versed in Greco-Roman lore. The same is true of the 1947 winning entry by Eliane Beaupuy, a student of Jean Dupas, former Prix de Rome winner and member of the Academy known for his academic, neoclassical style. Beaupuy's Les Parques relies heavily on references from antiquity, presenting three classical nudes as the mythological Fates. Trois femmes à la fontaine, by 1948 Prix de Rome winner François Orlandini, (a student of Dupas and Eugène Robert Pougheon (1914 Prix de Rome winner and Director of the program in Rome after 1942) also features three classically draped nudes joined harmoniously to their natural environment in a composition indicating a premium on balance, classical harmony, and sense of structure.

The tradition of classical nudes continued with Mlle. Françoise Boudet's (student of Eugène Narbonne) Dans la nature des jeunes filles exprimant le retour du printemps, 1950. Here a departure from previous winning entries is notable. A much more expressive effect is the result of heightened color and abstracted forms. Noticeably, this treatment is reserved for the background rather than the figures. Although outlined in heavy bold lines, conventional proportions and naturalistic contours are maintained for the human body, and unlike the background vegetation, there are no expressionistic or angular distortions to mar the classical values. In similar fashion, another 1950 winning entry (in 1950 two were chosen), Robert Savary's Dans la nature des jeunes filles exprimant le retour du printemps, while more painterly than former winners, treats figures with an integrity reserved for the human body alone (figure 5).

Prix de Rome winning entries throughout the 1950s continued to maintain a sense of formality and restraint, especially in regard to the human figure, as well as formal harmony in keeping with classical taste. The 1951 winning entry by Senelar (a student of legendary professor Maurice Brianchon who would bring to the school a new focus on the modern French masters Bonnard, Matisse and Vuillard as well as a record number of Prix de Rome winners in next several years) Le cheval compagnon de l'homme, offers allegorical, poetic figures in a moderately Picasso-like manner. Paul Guiramand, another student of Brianchon, won the 1952 competition with his Olympia completed in the manner of Manet's Olympia while retaining a more naturalistic treatment of the human figure (figure 6). Olympia's flesh is modulated in pink and earth tones and in anatomically derived shadows, maintaining a degree of naturalism at odds with contemporary trends.

Significant challenges to traditional aesthetic hierarchies are not to be found in André Brasilier's 1953 Panneau mural évoquant art dramatique, musique et danse, or Armand Sinko's 1954 Décoration pour une salle des mariages or Paul Ambille's 1955 Décoration pour une salle des mariages (figure 4). Ambille's entry does offer a somewhat exotic approach in costuming figures with bold, colonial attire and lush, tropical vegetation with sharp diagonals and flat patterning distanced from perspectival concerns. His flattened treatment and tilted perspective is a modern concession, as is his Picasso-like treatment of the angular, abstracted face of the female reclining on a park bench.

Henri Thomas, another student of Brianchon, won the 1956 prize with his Jeunes filles sortant de la mer, moderately reminiscent of Picasso's poetic, metaphoric treatment in his early Rose period with its iconic figures

Above left: 1950 Prix de Rome winning entry
Robert Savary, Dans la nature des jeunes filles exprimant le retour du printemps
no medium listed, no dimensions provided

Above right: 1952 Prix de Rome winning entry
Paul Guiramand, Olympia 1952, no medium listed, no dimensions provided
Photos: © Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, France
on a shore completed in tones referencing Mediterranean culture (figure 2). The poses here are reminiscent of classical sculpture. Primarily figurative works continued to win the competition, a trend sustained by Arnaud d'Hautevroy (a student of Raymond Jean Legueu), whose 1957 Antichambre en rotonde pour une compagnie d'assurances shows the influence of the Symbolists as well the fantasies of Henri Rousseau and Raymond Humbert's Jeune fille se préparant pour un bal costumé of 1958.

Another Briançon student, Arlette Budy, displayed a significantly more modern, abstract feel in her 1959, L'homme dans la porêt. Though it continues the traditional motif of figures in landscape setting, its minimalist, somewhat geometric treatment suggests a change in traditional standards for winning entries. Pierre Caron's 1960 entry, Hommage à Goya, suggests the influence of both Matisse and Goya in a moderately modern treatment evoking two masters of the past.

A Break with the Past

Finally in 1961 a significant break occurred in the Prix de Rome competition. Up to this point, works successfully competing for the coveted honor had focused on the human figure, whether in moderately modernist or staunchly traditional style, and had engaged only tame degrees of abstraction. After 1961, and until the competition's demise in 1968, winning entries would become increasingly abstract, breaking irreverently with traditional human form. A work by Maurice Briançon's student, Joël Moulin, demonstrates the dramatic departure from convention that occurred this year when an entry significantly more abstract than any previous entries won the prize. Moulin's Mariage du ciel et de la terre, described as "représentation non-figurative" captured the prize as an abstract landscape study in which the human figure is completely absent (figure 7). Based on the lessons of cubism, it explores the interplay of density and void, convex and concave elements, and mass and atmosphere, largely for formal impact. Muted tones allow concentration on pictorial structure derived from the meeting of land and sky. The piece represents a dramatic break with prior standards for Prix de Rome recipients and signals changes coming in the ensuing years.

"No Abstract Art before Age Forty" appears to have functioned as more than a passing headline in France throughout the 1950s. Essentially it was a mandate for Beaux Arts students seeking recognition within the nation's most prestigious school of art instruction. However, this mandate and the school's classicist stance would not go unchallenged. The traditional vision of the annual Prix de Rome competition, with its emphasis on norms associated with classical practices would be addressed at the highest levels of government. ENSBA professor Auguste Perret, commenting on the Prix de Rome competition during a 1949 luncheon with French President Vincent Auriol, suggested that modern reform of the competition was warranted. Students ought to first undertake a world tour; he suggested, returning to Rome in the final year of the award. The subject was also broached in parliamentary debate. Addressing the Conseil de la République on May 17, 1956, legislator Léo Hamon recommended that policies tending toward "dirigisme" in the arts be carefully avoided, while maintaining state support for the arts. Hamon proposed wider recognition of studio artists and revision of the Prix de Rome contract: four years spent studying Latin antiquity seemed a bit outdated, he explained; why not spend time in New York and Berlin as well?¹⁰

However, efforts to challenge the classicist vision of the Prix de Rome met with formidable resistance. As one observer noted, efforts to "de-academicize artistic education and change the selection process for the Prix de Rome have been thwarted by entrenched opposition."¹¹ An example of such opposition is offered in the records of the Commission charged with updating fine arts instruction in France, mentioned above. Faced
with calls for modernization of the Prix de Rome, commission members concluded that jury composition would shield the process from any significant degree of change. With startling frankness the commission recorded the following:

No press campaign, no student demonstration, will interfere with the Competition. Why? The number of painters on the jury named from within the Academy comes to 14, and the number of painters named by the Ministry, 14. That makes a jury of 28 for the Painting section. In full session the jury has never passed 40 to 44 members; thus the 28 painters present a large bloc. The Academy half of the painters, plus the 14 outside members vote homogeneously (emphasis mine). Their decisions, by the regulations currently in effect, are irreversible. 12

In the wake of the student protests of 1968, Minister of Culture André Malraux shut down the Prix de Rome competition at the National School of Fine Arts. Rather than embrace significant degrees of change, the competition was cancelled altogether.

Classical standards for the arts in France, institutionalized by Louis XIV, persisted for centuries within the National School of Fine Arts. Its Prix de Rome competition, held annually until 1968, served as a prime vehicle by which classical standards were maintained. Norms continued long after the arrival of more avant-garde approaches for which today the French are often more widely known. Instruction at the most prestigious school for the visual arts in France continued to bolster an officially recognized classical style taken from pre-modern painting well through the mid-twentieth century, as a review of the annual Prix de Rome competition at the French National School in the 1950s demonstrates.

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End Notes
1 Jean Souverbie, “Pas d’art abstrait pour les moins de quarante ans,” Figure Littéraire July 14 (no year given; filed with other material from 1950s). Archives nationales (A.N.) AJ52.808.
4 “L’Ecole des Beaux-Arts, comme toute grande école, doit conserver les valeurs fondamentales, mais elle doit aussi pour rester vivante, s’enrichir des valeurs nouvelles que le temps présente lui apporte.” Report from Nicolas Untersailer, ENSBA Director, A.N. AJ52.808.
5 Reports in regard to instructional reforms, ENSBA 1947-1954, A.N. AJ52.972. At the suggestion that industrial interests such as graphic design be incorporated into ENSBA instruction an exchange of (divided) opinion took place between Jacques Jaulard, Directeur Général des Arts et des Lettres, M. Monteux, Directeur de l’Enseignement et de la Production Artistique et Manu. Fontaine and Mousinac. The topic was reissuied for discussion at a January 30, 1958 meeting at which a report would be given from the director of a regional ENSBA school at Besançon incorporating such a program.
7 “Juries are generally conservative and hostile to technical innovation, given that they are made up for the most part of professors who wish to maintain their position.” Moulin, 109.
8 Once attributed to Giorgione, Concert champêtre (1509-1510) is now considered to be by Titian.
9 A number of aesthetically conservative artists in France would suffer political consequences of collaborationist aesthetic opinion and were charged after the Liberation as Nazi sympathizers. A group of prominent French artists participated in an infamous Nazi Germany sponsored trip to visit the art of Germany in 1942 and a catalog of Arno Brecker’s work was published in France by Flammarion in 1942. One particularly masculine angel in Guenot’s 1945 prize-winning entry carries striking resemblance to the virile statue of official Nazi sculptor Arno Brecker who, we recall, maintained friendships with several aesthetically conservative artists in France. A number of students winning the Prix de Rome in the period after 1945 studied under professors charged as Nazi collaborationists, some of whom briefly lost their posts at the ENSBA as a result.
11 Moulin, 110.