CARLE VERNET AS A HISTORICAL PAINTER

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Mr. Benisovich is well known for his research in the history of art, particularly in the field of eighteenth-century European painting.

Antoine Charles Horace, known as Carle, Vernet, a man of wit, spoke with some truth of his career as a painter when he said, "I am like the Grand Dauphin: a king's son, a king's father, never the king himself." Carle Vernet's reputation was, however, considerable, though, unlike that of his father, Joseph, painter of seascapes, or his son, Horace, painter of battles, it was not based on his paintings. He is known chiefly for the lithographs that spread throughout the world his sketches and water colors of hunting and racing, sports of the fashionable world. In these he showed incomparable skill in representing horses—in stables, on the course at Longchamps, or in hunting scenes in the forests of Compiègne and Chantilly.

It was as a painter, however, that Carle Vernet embarked on his career. He began his studies at the Academy of Painting and Sculpture in Paris, entered the usual competitions, and, winning two Prix de Rome (in 1779 and 1782), studied at the French Academy in Rome. In 1789 he was provisionally admitted to the Royal Academy; this circumstance was unusual in that his father was also a member, though he died later the same year.

The official account of Carle Vernet's admission is found in the minutes of the Royal Academy for its meeting of August 24, 1789:

"In opening the meeting M. Vernet, Councilor, presented to the assembly Master Antoine Charles Horace Vernet, his son, aspiring historical painter, born in Bordeaux, aged thirty-one years, who had brought his works with him. The usual votes having been taken, the Academy accepted the said presentation and the Director will assign what he should do for his admission."

We do not know what works he brought with him, but we do know his reception picture, the Triumph of Paulus Aemilius. The name of the new member does not appear again in the records of the Academy, but that society was not much longer in existence. We do not know whether the picture ordered for his admission was ever delivered or whether it stayed in the painter's studio. Reception pieces were actually the property of the Academy, but with its dissolution in the tempest of the Revolution there were many changes of ownership. Vernet's picture was acquired about 1890 by Heber R. Bishop and was sold again at auction in New York in 1906, when it was bought by Darius O. Mills and presented to the Metropolitan Museum.

The subject of the picture is a Roman triumph, that of the general Paulus Aemilius after his victorious campaign against Perseus, king of Macedonia, in 168 B.C. "A procession headed by men-at-arms passes across the Via Sacra through the monumental arches to the Capitol; at the right is the general wearing a brilliant red toga; he is seated in a golden chariot drawn by four white horses; following him are the vanquished, including Perseus, with folded arms and bent head, his daughter, dressed in white, and her two young sons; in the background are classic buildings, including the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus with its approach of one hundred steps; in the distance is a range of hills." The young painter, in paying his respects to the antique, made use of this vast scene as a setting for horses. It was the period when Vien was trying out his reforms, when David, a studio comrade of Vernet's, was already thinking of his Oath of the Horatii. Vernet's picture, like so many of the time, was a work of transition, following new ideas but remaining bound to the preceding style and the French character. The composition is simple, arranged between two arches; mountains in the manner of Poussin serve as background. According to the ideas set
Two paintings of classical subjects by the French artist Antoine Charles Horace Vernet (1758-1836), who is better known as Carle Vernet. ABOVE: The Triumph of Paulus Aemilius, a Roman general. In the Metropolitan Museum. Gift of Darius O. Mills, 1906. LEFT: The Funeral of Patroclus, which illustrates a passage from Book XXI of the “Iliad.” In the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City. Vernet's specialty was painting horses in action, and he was famous in his day for his lithographs of hunting and racing scenes.
forth towards the end of the century by P. H. de Valenciennes, nature should serve as a frame to set off an antique scene, as an accompaniment to a historical theme. But the subject also gave Vernet the opportunity of painting horsemen with spirited mounts, whose action enlivens this cortege in bas-relief. The painter, having forced his imagination, found his reward in the horses and chariot. Begun without any set plan, the picture develops like a frieze; it required two added pieces of canvas to complete its narrative.

Recent writers to the contrary, however, this concession of Vernet's to the precepts of his masters was not his "last homage to classical taste." The writer has had the occasion to examine in the galleries of the venerable Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City a painting called the Funeral of Patroclus, signed by Carle Vernet and dated 1703. Armand Dayot, who wrote the latest biography of Vernet (1925), does not mention this picture. Others speak of it in passing, probably not having seen it, as it seems to have been already on exhibition in Mexico in 1875.

This picture belongs to a period in Vernet's life of which we know little, the years of the Revolution. At first a partisan of new ideas, he, like so many others, became discouraged with the course of events. He had already left the National Guard in 1792. Then came the execution of his sister, the beautiful Madame Chalgrin, wife of an émigré, for whom he had even obtained the intervention of David. He himself thought of emigrating.

Vernet's name appears in the Procès verbaux de la Commune Générale des Arts et de la Société Populaire et Républicaine des Arts among those of artists "non encore reconnus en assemblée générale," and he is recorded as being admitted "le premier jour du premier mois de l'an II de la République unie et indivisible." This was 1793, the year of the San Carlos picture, and it was in the same year that this picture was exhibited in the Salon, under the more exact title of The Chariot Races Ordered by Achilles for the Funeral of Patroclus.

The picture illustrates a passage in Book xxiii of the Iliad, and the painter spares us no detail. Several episodes are shown taking place simultaneously, in a landscape much like that of the Triumph of Paulus Aemilius, with a city in the distance. Five chariots drawn by war horses compete for the victory, which Diomedes was to win. Vernet was no longer afraid of the gentlemen of the Academy; his Greeks are drawn by Barbary steeds like those he had seen on the Corso in Rome, when he, like Géricault, had painted the races. This is what interested him, and there is little of the heroic in the picture. The color scheme is not fortunate and perhaps reveals in Vernet a growing indifference to painting. If we miss his usual spirit, the vivacity that, according to Charles Blanc, is the mark of his talent, it can be put down to the stormy events of that "année II," when the Funeral of Patroclus was painted.

Vernet was pensioned by the Republic in 1794; the next year he received the amount of 4,000 livres. The Funeral of Patroclus was acquired by the State and is mentioned in a letter from the Commission of Public Instruction to the Conservator of the new state museum in the Louvre concerning the removal of a number of paintings to the Salon without burdensome expense to the artists. "Regnault, Suvié, Vincent, Vernet have pictures that belong to the Republic, and that is another reason for paying the transportation." Then there was the question of preparing the pictures for the Salon. There is a bill from the restorer C. Picault for 387 livres for varnishing six large pictures by Hubert Robert, others by Vincent, Le Barbier, Giraudet, and one by "Citizen Vernet representing the Funeral of Patroclus." It was paid by the Treasurer of the Conservatory of the Museum. Thus, transported and varnished at government expense, this picture painted in the grand style in a time full of apprehension and foreboding was again exhibited for Salon visitors in 1795.