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ARTISTIC KNOWLEDGE AND TRAVEL IN MAXIME DU CAMP'S WRITINGS

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Abstract: *Maxime Du Camp became well known in the 19th century French literature not only as Gustave Flaubert's close friend but also as a traveler-writer, author of many travelogues and important photographer. This article aims to illustrate the author's vast artistic knowledge, which he acquired through the so called 'artistic instruction journey', an elite pedagogical and social institution which started in the 17th century, of which he became a genuine representative two centuries later.*

Key-words: travel, art history, museums, painting, Holland, Rembrandt, art criticism

Maxime Du Camp brings to life the project of the writer-traveler, which has only one model: the encyclopedia. In his narratives he delights in displaying his scientific, historical, mythological, and not least, artistic knowledge. Thus, he presents himself as a connoisseur of art, who frequents museums, galleries, and exhibitions, who can offer informed commentary on works of art, and who readily recognizes the different architectural styles of the buildings he encounters: cathedrals, churches, palaces, châteaux. It is also from this perspective that Du Camp seems to draw close to the French travelers of the seventeenth century, among whom we witness the emergence of the **artistic instruction journey**, in the form of the European « grand tour »[1] ; this, as an institution at once pedagogical and social, brings together, with some detours and variations, the North of France, Italy, the Low Countries, Germany, and of course Holland (which, as we shall illustrate in the pages that follow, arouses the author's keenest interest, since he tours its most important cities to visit its art museums). In this type of journey, the aim is to visit the great cultural centers, to become acquainted with works of art and monuments, and also to study history, customs, and cultural life. This journey is thus, in general, a tour of cities and, moreover, it entails a voyage marked by stops of greater or lesser length, where the emphasis is placed on cataloguing cultural and artistic riches.[2]

[1] At the time, unlike, for example, travel to the Orient, which helped create a sense of distance and often suggested an atmosphere of wandering, the grand tour tends to disregard travel as such, giving the details of the route a purely functional character and placing the emphasis on the cultural and artistic riches encountered.

[2] For more detail on the artistic instruction journey and the European « grand tour » of the seventeenth century, see Friedrich Wolfzettel, *Le discours du voyageur. Pour une histoire littéraire du récit de voyage en France, du Moyen Age au XVIII^e siècle*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1996, p. 210-222.

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Among the painters whose canvases he views in the museums Du Camp visits, most often during his journey through Holland, we may list : Rubens, Van Dyck, Rembrandt, Veronese, Van Gogh, Salvator Rosa, Van Leyden, Van Bree, Breughel, Van Der Eeckout, Van Der Meer, Van Der Velde, Vernet, Boucher, Gerard Dov, Van Ostade, Van Haarlem, Paul Potter, Crayer, Canaletto, etc., but the artist who impresses him most, and to whom he devotes the greatest number of pages, is **Rembrandt**. He even admits that a « single masterly canvas » by this artist is worth his trip to Rotterdam.

As a knowledgeable connoisseur, he sets out on this journey only after rigorously preparing books containing critical documentation on the painters and the canvases he is to see : « You who know me, my friend, can well imagine that I did not leave Paris without stuffing in a few old books. »[3]

The traveler's attitude toward the canvases he prizes and looks at « lovingly », as he admits, is one of devotion, of veneration of intense emotion, as though he found himself in a sacred space, in the heights of spiritual experience, which renders him indifferent to everything else—even to his guide's explanations about the most important buildings of the city, explanations he finds useless : I scarcely listened to what my guide was telling me ; he wanted to lead me to the Stadtholders' palace, to the palace of the States-General ; I was thinking only of the paintings ; we climbed the museum steps, and I confess that my heart was pounding a little as I crossed the threshold of the sanctuary where, in all its glory, one of the most triumphant masterpieces of Rembrandt was displayed.[4]

The sight of the paintings, in all their variety, leads the writer, already positioned as a true art critic, to venture judgments on the distinction between true, vocational talent—which should always be animated by profound, meditative, spiritual, radiant experience, by the ceaseless search for the beyond—and its imitator, a « monkey » who merely reproduces the true painter and cannot awaken artistic emotion. The comparison between Rembrandt's magnificent canvases and those of his pupil, Van der Eeckout—whom Du Camp considers to have « copied to the point of plagiarism »—offers a telling example:

> Here indeed are the same attitudes, the same arrangements, the same general composition, the same effects of light attempted if not achieved. Where is that soul which shines divinely in every work of the master ? Where is that overflowing life ? Where is that formidable power that shakes you like the hand of a Titan ? I do not see it, I do not feel it.
>
> It is not enough to mix one's palette after a master's, to paint with his brushes, to study his technique, to imitate his composition. Material skill is worthy and deserving only when it serves a real talent, given by nature, enlarged by study, made fruitful by meditation, ceaselessly gazing beyond […] ; their imitators dwelt upon the earth, crawling like legless cripples, believing they had wings because they saw others fly.[5]

As a connoisseur of the field of painting, Du Camp identifies the negative elements in a painting's composition, which he does not hesitate to point out and condemn: poorly matched or even « garish » shades, dry and « jarring » outlines, an excess of detail, certain exaggerated chromatic tones that « strain and tire the eye », and too great an importance given to objects, at the expense of the figures, which leads the viewer to regard such a canvas as being « of the third or fourth rank ».

He succeeds not only in distinguishing artistic value from its opposite, but also in detecting analogies and correspondences between different painters—major or minor—between their creations and the cultural space that

[3] Maxime Du Camp, *En Hollande*, Malassis et de Broise, Paris, 1859, p. 27,
[4] *Ibidem*, p. 32.
[5] *Ibidem*, p. 48.

shaped their artistic vision: « Van Der Meer is a rough painter, who proceeds by broadly applied flat tints, built up in thickness ; he must have visited Italy. He is an exaggerated Canaletto. »[6]

The author delights not only in analyzing the canvases, with their chromatic ranges, inflections of light, etc., but also in commenting on the themes depicted in these paintings, which often invite him to reflect, to philosophize on them. The theme of « the injustice » of justice, of death, of legality, of security, suggested to him by a painting in the Amsterdam museum, plunges him into rhetorical questioning and leads him to personal judgments on the subject :

> Alas ! This indeed is human justice ! Someone has killed, and it kills; then it says : my scales are balanced, for there is as much blood in one pan as in the other. Is it legal ? Yes ! Is it just ? No ! Death does not erase death. Whenever a crime is committed, it is because those in charge of society's security have not done their duty ; and they ought, in that case, to be struck with a fine that would go to help those who suffer from the murder committed. You punish, very well : prevent or repair, that will be better. [7]

It would not be difficult to notice Du Camp's predilection for verisimilitude, for the pursuit and exactness of detail, for the pulse of life, for the mechanics of the living or dead body, as rendered by painting, when the author of such a canvas is a great painter like Rembrandt.

It would be interesting to note that a pioneer of photography, who crossed deserts, countryside, towns and villages to produce his more than two hundred calotypes, affirms that ***painting*** stands above the art of photography and above poetry, by virtue of its expression of truth, the finesse of its nuances, and its beauty : « The daguerreotype has never been so true, poetry has never invented anything more beautiful. »[8]

In the analysis he offers of Rembrandt's canvas, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp*, which he sees in Amsterdam and considers to be of absolute beauty, he fully grasps Rembrandt's genius, who, in his view, becomes another god, recreating reality in its thousand nuances, through meticulous research, through an incomparable science of composition, through the artistic emotion he conveys, through his faithfulness to the « miracle » of life. The way he approaches the work of art in its entirety makes the writer a true ***art critic*** who decodes the artistic message, looking beyond first impressions, beyond the first visual contact with the canvas. He gradually retraces the stages of the painting's perception, creating a genuine narrative, which the use of the narrative present helps to enliven.

Let us closely follow a comment he makes on the Rembrandt painting called *The Night Watch*, which he considers, for this reason, the height of art :

> [...] **at first glance** it is a great confusion, a sort of hubbub of shadows and light in which the eye vainly seeks its bearings : these people are running and colliding ; it is not a crowd, it is a scramble ; **then, little by little**, once the eye, grown accustomed to this surprise of color, has regained its calm, one sees the scene sort itself out, each figure come alive with its own expression, and **one understands** that what one had taken for tumult is only life as it must have appeared at the very moment chosen by the artist; one cannot conceive that these eager militiamen could have, at this precise instant depicting them, other attitudes, other gestures, other expressions. This is the very height of art, and it is what I admire above

[6] *Ibidem*, p. 36.
[7] *Ibidem*, p. 38. On the conditioning relationship between human society and wild land, see Laurent Margatin, « Paysage et géographie poétique du romantisme allemand à Julien Gracq », in S. Meitinger, *Espaces et paysages – Représentations et inventions du paysage de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, L'Harmattan, Paris, p. 247.
[8] *Ibidem*, p. 40.

all in Rembrandt. [9]

It is evident that our viewer can capture the essence of the artistic message in every line, in every stroke and the beginning of every gesture, beyond appearances, confusion, and shadows, and it would seem that the artist reveals his composition only to the extent that a knowledgeable connoisseur such as Du Camp does.

In the way he conceives the space of the canvas, one detects an entire range of elements belonging to the morphology of the photographic image : the modulations of light, which produce the image not only through an effect of brightening but also through an effect of darkening. He is drawn to the art of chiaroscuro, to the more or less strong contrasts of shadow and light, which he regards as a successful approach and a learned artistic practice.

In taking an interest in the distribution of light within the same painting, he mentions « chiaroscuro », the casting of « shadow », « half-tone », « raking light », illuminated by « conventional highlights », gleaming « whites », « uniform brilliance », « relief », and so on. As for the rendering of chromatic inflections, it is worth noting that the writer holds a particular aesthetic attitude, attributing to color a very varied range of epithets, uncommon for a notion as abstract as color, through which he delights in personifying it ; in Du Camp's vision, it can be « dazzling », « blind », « dangerous », « guilty », « frantic », « seized with vertigo », creating by itself a stormy spectacle, which the writer does not hesitate to turn into narrative. He thus seems to penetrate the very space of the painting, which, through its gripping power, « astonishes », « dazzles », « crushes » him, as Du Camp admits in hyperbolic terms :

> The colour of this painting has become proverbial ; it is dazzling, it is blind, it is pushed as far as possible, beyond that it would be dangerous, I might almost say guilty ; it proceeds by violent impasto linked together by glazes that restoration has worn somewhat ; but, at times too, it seems frantic and as if seized with vertigo when it stands out in real relief upon the white ruffs and the damascened gorgets. This painting is a masterpiece less for its beauty than for its gripping power. It astonishes, dazzles, crushes. [10]

What is remarkable is Du Camp's particular concern for the way one ought to look at, and approach, paintings in a museum, which relates to spatial coordinates such as their placement, their height, the distance between them and from the floor, and the most suitable angle from which to view them. He also mentions the coordinates linked to lighting, which should vary, appropriate to the chromatic specifics of each painting : the light could be intense or moderate, and come from various directions : from above, from the side, etc. In his conception, the gaze directed at a painting, which is an autonomous creation, is in itself a mastery presupposing quite special approaches : one must adjust immediate reality to the virtual, represented reality of the work of art. As a connoisseur of art, he is aware of the various traditional interpretations of famous paintings, which he takes the liberty of supplementing, adjusting, and sometimes even calling into question, disputing: « [*The Night Watch* by Rembrandt] is perhaps the strangest painting I have ever seen, and I have seen many. There is still no agreement on this : did the artist intend to depict a night scene or a day scene? The subject is not chaos, as has been said ; it is quite simple and sorts itself out with ease. » [11]

To do so, he draws parallels, points out certain correspondences between the different planes and figures of

[9] *Ibidem*, p. 137. The emphasis is ours.
[10] *Ibidem*, p. 139.
[11] *Ibidem*, p. 132.

the paintings, assesses reversals in the characters' roles, thereby analyzing details that critics find insignificant but which for him represent arguments in favor of his thesis:

> […] beside the captain, and as if establishing the luminous parallel with the young girl in the background, walks the lieutenant […] ; this secondary figure has become principal, and out of this girl he has made the heroine of this tumultuous gathering. She is charming; [...] from her belt hangs a white chicken tied by the feet, and a full purse floating at the end of its long cords. (I shall tell you later why this seemingly insignificant detail seems to me to prove that the scene does not depict a night watch and takes place in broad daylight). [12]

He continues to dispute the classical interpretations of the painting he analyzes (which hold that the action takes place at night, and that the figures are burghers receiving a prince), illustrating his position through a chain of deductions, logical justifications, and details he finds revealing for his analysis. He mentions these traditional interpretations in the form of rhetorical questions and ends by refuting them with growing vigor, in order to reiterate and reinforce his own opinion—that this canvas presents a daytime, not a nighttime, scene, whose figures are militiamen rather than burghers. Thus he presents himself as a true discoverer, a decipherer of the artistic message :

> Is this a night watch ? I do not believe so ! Not a torch ! Not a lantern ! these are not, as has been believed, burghers hurrying out in the evening to go and receive some foreign prince ; they are brave militiamen of the city […] Rembrandt was paid by a number of militiamen to make their portraits (their inscribed names bear witness to it), he grouped them, according to the needs of his composition, in the exercise of one of their most frequent activities. If they were rushing out in the evening to receive a prince, why is the lieutenant so little surprised that a musket is fired right up against his hat ? They are going to the shooting range, and that is all. The scene takes place in broad daylight. [13]

Thus, he displays a remarkable command of architectural terminology, which seems characteristic of a true specialist in the field. His descriptions and analyses abound with architectural metalanguage : « pilasters », « porticoes and Corinthian capitals », « turrets », « pentagons », « chamfered mullions », « louvers », « thistle-carved coffers », « nave with side aisles », « transept », « flowering of pillars », « trefoil and trilobed balustrades », « Renaissance foliate scrollwork », « curtain walls », « merlons », « ogee or narrowed pointed arches », « flamboyant Gothic », etc. In describing a church in Holland dedicated to St. Matthew, he seems to detect and decipher a variety of architectural elements specific to the artistic currents of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, which he identifies as though he were simultaneously reading a book on the history of European architecture. In his descriptions of the temples of Antiquity, cathedrals, churches, palaces, châteaux, manor houses, and official buildings such as town halls, railway stations, and museums, which he visits during his travels in Europe, Africa, and Asia, the traveler displays an impressive command of architecture, which he has rigorously built up through his encyclopedic reading, and he is a very knowledgeable connoisseur of artistic currents and movements and the centuries to which they correspond : the Gothic, the Renaissance, the Baroque, Neoclassicism, and Neo-Gothic.

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[12] *Ibidem*, p. 130.
[13] *Ibidem*, p. 140.

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