

QUATREMÈRE DE QUINCY, ANTOINE CHRYSOSTÔME, *Quatremère de Quincy's Moral considerations on the place and purpose of works of art: introduction and translation*, Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr. (tr.), Lexington Books, 2021, xlvi + 87 pp., 14 b&w illus., \$45 ebook, \$90 hardback.

In 2006, David Carrier (Carrier, 2006, *Museum Skepticism: A History of the Display of Art in Public Galleries*. Durham: Duke University Press.) coined the term 'museum skepticism' to describe the idea that moving artworks into museum settings strips them of essential facets of their meaning; among art historians, this is better known as 'decontextualization', 'denaturing', or 'museumization'. Although they do not usually name it directly, many contemporary debates in the philosophy of art are informed by an inclination towards museum skepticism, from work on aesthetic cognitivism (Feagin, Susan, 1995, "Paintings and their places" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73.2: 260-8.) and contextualism (Danto, Arthur C., 1988, "Artifact and Art", in *ART/ARTIFACT: African Art in Anthropological Collections. Exhibition Catalogue*. New York: Center for African Art and Prestel Verlag, 18-32.) to cultural appropriation (Eaton, A. W. and Gaskell, Ivan, 2009, "Do subaltern artifacts belong in art museums?," *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, ed. James O. Young and Conrad Brunk, Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 235-67), street art (Baldini, Andrea, 2016, "Street Art: A Reply to Riggle" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74.2: 187-91), and the value of authenticity (Korsmeyer, Carolyn, 2016, "Real Old Things" *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 56.3: 219-31). The very first museum skeptic, however, was Antoine Chrysostôme Quatremère de Quincy (1755-1849).

Quatremère de Quincy's name is not one that is well known to philosophers of art. His ideas, however, should be of great interest to aestheticians everywhere, including both those who specialize in contemporary analytic aesthetics as well as those with an abiding interest in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinkers. This book is a short polemic against the practice of displaying art outside its context of origin, such as in a museum or gallery setting. First published in French in 1815, it represents the first significant articulation of 'museum skepticism' in art history. Although it was first translated into English in 1821, that translation omitted passages judged incomplete or repetitive by the translator, among other faults. The present translation is the first since 1821, and the first complete translation of Quatremère de Quincy's essay.

Though typically described as a polemic against museum collections (as above), the *Moral Considerations* are both more nuanced than this description suggests and broader in scope, encompassing notable reflections on appreciation, beauty, the commercialization of art, the role of the imagination, the connection between music and emotion, and the value of encountering authentic material from the past. Although these elements are mobilized against museum collections, aestheticians will find them of independent interest as well.

By "moral considerations," Quatremère de Quincy had in mind the broader, archaic sense of the term as pertaining to the non-sensuous and immaterial (p. 11). Art, he thought, is morally useful when it uses imitation to broaden the horizons of our thinking, rather than merely capitalizing on sensual pleasure (p. 11). In particular, he thought that the primary ('moral') purpose of art is to move us to strong feelings (pp. 37, 44), so much so that the concept of taste itself is a matter of feeling rather than consisting of extensive knowledge or careful discernment (p. 23).

Throughout the essay, Quatremère de Quincy is preoccupied with conserving and promoting this moral use of art. The value of art, he thought, is enhanced by its having a particular purpose (pp. 5), and it is this fittingness-for-purpose that he thought was under threat in the early nineteenth century, when works of art were collected from around the world for bulk display in galleries such as the Musée Napoleon (now the Louvre).

When art is displaced from its original context and housed in a museum or gallery—especially in the kind of mass exhibition popular at the time—it loses both its 'moral' essence, and its sense of

independent existence (p. 23). To displace art to a museum setting, he thought, is to signal that society has no further use for that work (p. 23), since it is no longer allowed to speak to us on its own terms. The works we most want to display in such collections were never intended for such display, and so their effect is lost to us, relegated to memory, fiction, or conjecture (pp. 28-30). Quatremère de Quincy underscores this point in an especially flowery rhetorical turn when he asks “What do they have to say to me, these mausoleums without sepulchres, these doubly empty cenotaphs, these tombs which even death no longer inhabits?” (p. 30).

In particular, the gallery setting invites audiences to relate differently to the works on display, to adopt a critical eye more suited for competition than genuine appreciation. The result, he said, is that “the false honour paid to objects we hold up in respect reduces them in the court of public opinion more than it raises their price” (p. 24). *In situ*, art is part and parcel of everyday life, and presents ordinary people with regular opportunities for deep feeling. The gallery setting, however, centralizes—and thus rarefies—our encounters with art, and invites us to treat the works on display as being in competition with one another (p. 24).

If one of the great advantages of galleries and museums, from the modern perspective, is their facilitation of comparisons across genres, styles, and time, the great disadvantage, for Quatremère de Quincy, is that they invite audiences to adopt a critical attitude towards the art on display, rather than cultivating the feelings (“sentiments”) which the art was intended to promote (pp. 25-6). Museum collections thus represent the triumph of reason over feeling and encourage us to adopt a different relationship with the works on display. When we read for pleasure, for example, our attention is focused on the story—on individual characters and the situations in which they find themselves. When reading for a class or with an eye to a review, however, our focus shifts to the roles each character plays, to the arc of the narrative, and so on (p. 27). Likewise, gallery settings focus our attention on the comparative characteristics of the works on display and diminish our ability to appreciate any single one on its own terms. By focusing our appreciative attention on analysis and critique in this way, we both strip the work of its moving (“moral”) content and inhibit our own ability to feel in response to the work (p. 44).

But Quatremère de Quincy’s concern for art’s moral utility was not confined to its proper display. He also worried about the state of art-making, as the Academy system took hold in Europe and art was increasingly put to commercial and secular uses. Commercial art, he thought, is inimical to beauty and genius because it is “commissioned from artists without a purpose or place, much as if one were to commission vases or furniture from a manufacturer, after which one would seek out a proper use for them” (pp. 14-5). Commercial art derives from an individual’s ‘taste for luxury’, and so is subject to change with each new fad (p. 12); what value it has is thus bound to be merely accidental (p. 10).

Great art, on the other hand, is inspired by—and inspires—‘morally significant’ purposes, such as strong emotions which cry out to be communicated (pp. 16-7). Great art has universal and durable appeal because it aims to inspire strong reactions in both educated and uneducated audiences alike (p. 21): it is popular because the feeling it communicates is readily accessible without prior knowledge, but nonetheless manages to reward the expert’s knowledge by encouraging them to take an interrogative interest in the work (pp. 21, 37). But it is precisely this sensibility which is actively discouraged by Academy painting, which constrains subject matter and “[discounts] ambition” by encouraging students to develop a lifelong style (pp. 17-8).

Nor are Quatremère de Quincy’s concerns limited to paintings and galleries: he also worried about contemporary changes to musical practices. In particular, he thought that the practice of giving and attending concerts was analogous to that of attending galleries to see art (p. 52). Because of its immaterial nature, he thought, music is thoroughly dependent on the imagination for its appreciation. Sound alone only appeals to our auditory senses, and thus its impressions fade quickly, whereas the

feelings aroused by the music, supplemented by the imagination, have a lasting effect on us (p. 53). Music, for Quatremère de Quincy, is the art of feeling *par excellence*, and the feelings we experience in response to the music are shaped in no small part by our associations and surroundings (p. 54). The sounds are reminiscent of certain memories or feelings and associations we have, and the imagination allows us to paint a picture of those memories and feelings, to make them real for ourselves (p. 54).

We can observe, here, a nascent contextualism. In his discussion of the effects of ambience and setting on our experience of music, for example, Quatremère de Quincy cautioned that “Too often we assign the source of the impressions that works of Art make on us exclusively to these artworks themselves” (p. 54). Likewise, he argued that beautiful artworks, although they can stand on their own where experts and masterpieces are concerned, have their beauty enhanced by the context for which they were designed—“they please us even more if that virtue stands in a real and positive harmony with the effects of exterior and accessory causes” (p. 55). A work like Michelangelo’s *Pietà* (1498-99), for example, has a beauty of its own, but that beauty was accentuated by its original location in a mausoleum; and its current location in St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican surely enhances its beauty more than an installation in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art possibly could.

The key, for Quatremère de Quincy, is that the work should be experienced in a place which is conducive to favourably engaging the audience’s imagination and fostering in them the appropriate disposition (p. 56)—in the *Pietà*’s case, one of bleakness, sorrow, and religious awe. When we move an artwork from its original location, we hamper our ability to engage with it imaginatively and attenuate its ability to move us (pp. 49; 66 n30).

Curiously, Quatremère de Quincy appears to have softened his tone over time. In the preface to the published collection of his letters to Canova (dated 1836), which is included as Appendix One in this volume, he defends the removal of the Parthenon marbles to the British Museum. This defence is primarily utilitarian: their relocation, he argued, saved them from deterioration and destruction, made them more widely accessible (to Grand Tourism), and also allowed audiences a much closer and more careful inspection of them than would have been possible when they sat atop the Parthenon. They are thus better able to stand as artworks in their own right than when they were mere architectural adornments.

The tension here is real, but perhaps not as pronounced as it may at first seem. We can defend the preservation of the Parthenon marbles on utilitarian grounds, as Quatremère de Quincy does, while still conceding that their museumization has changed them and their meaning in important respects (and changed the ruins of the Parthenon, too). In an endnote, Ruprecht wonders whether Quatremère de Quincy’s concern for art’s moral purpose doesn’t boil down to a committed Catholic’s concerns about the changes mandated by the French Revolution’s new secularism (p. 70 n54). This may well capture Quatremère de Quincy’s guiding motivation, since he spends so much time and energy lambasting Napoleon’s pillaging of the Vatican Museum for the Musée Napoleon, but does not seem overly exercised about the existence of the Vatican Museum itself. The Vatican Museum, he argued, is not a secular location, and thus cultivates the same kind of shrine-like atmosphere in which its pieces were originally found.

But Quatremère de Quincy’s essay is much more than a simple diatribe against museum collections, as I hope I have shown. Its guiding principle is its commitment to the ‘moral’ purpose of art, from which everything else follows. It is a concern for preserving that moral purpose which leads him to museum skepticism. From an art-historical perspective, the essay’s most interesting facet is its museum skepticism. But for a philosopher of art, its most interesting feature is the defence of contextualism that underpins that museum skepticism and rationalizes Quatremère de Quincy’s wide-ranging remarks. By placing the essay’s theoretical emphasis on contextualism rather than museum skepticism *per se*, it is easy enough to explain his apparent inconsistency, as well as his own protestations of consistency: for religious art, the Vatican Museum preserves more contextual

information than a secular museum could. As for the Parthenon marbles, their context of origin actively inhibited uptake of the relevant contextual cues.

This edition has a great deal to recommend it. Ruprecht's translation is a joy to read and does an admirable job of capturing the flamboyance of the original. I have detected few questionable translation decisions, and none of real significance. Ruprecht's endnotes are informative and useful, especially when it comes to elucidating the historical context of Quatremère de Quincy's remarks or comparing them to his other writings. Ruprecht is also to be commended for appending the preface to Quatremère de Quincy's collected letters to Canova, which offers an important counterpoint to the museum skepticism expressed in the *Moral Considerations*. The appended chronologies of Quatremère de Quincy's works and of their extant translations into English are likewise valuable additions for scholars keen to come to grips with this neglected scholar's output.

But philosophers interested in this seminal work of art theory are bound to find Ruprecht's extensive introduction somewhat inapt. Indeed, for a work ostensibly devoted to Quatremère de Quincy, Ruprecht's introduction devotes an inordinate amount of space to an overenthusiastic encomium to *Johann Joachim Winckelmann*—to the point that, inexplicably, the text's very first illustration is a portrait of Winckelmann, and features no portraits whatsoever of its actual author! The index is similarly frustrating for anyone hoping to examine particular ideas in isolation since it consists primarily of proper names rather than concepts, and what few concepts *are* represented (e.g. freedom, idealism, and 'spirit') are better suited to religious studies than philosophy, let alone aesthetics. Luckily, the text itself is quite short, so that it is no great chore to read its entirety to find Quatremère de Quincy's thoughts on, say, music and emotion.

Whatever its value to other disciplines, this essay is particularly rewarding for philosophical aesthetics, and deserves to be on all our reading lists; that it hasn't yet featured there prominently is a tragic accident of history. Its minor shortcomings aside, Ruprecht's translation should help to remedy the situation.

XHIGNESSE, MICHEL-ANTOINE. Department of Philosophy, Capilano University.