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Author

Linden, Delanie

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Denis Diderot's "Salons" as Art Conservation in Eighteenth-Century France

Delanie Linden

When the eighteenth-century French philosopher Denis Diderot penned his nine manuscripts of art criticism from 1759 to 1781, known as his *Salons*, he frequently alluded to the fragility of art.¹ His *Salons* described artworks on display at the annual or biennial salon exhibitions of the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. In his account of Carle van Loo's painting *Augustus Closing the Doors of the Temple of Janus* (1765), Diderot imagines the painting on fire, stating:

And yet if, after the artist's death, a fire had consumed this composition, sparing only the group of priests and a few scattered heads, all of us would have acknowledged the impression these precious remains made on us by crying out: What a shame!²

The conception of van Loo's painting ablaze was likely inspired by recent events of natural disaster in eighteenth-century Europe, and in particular, the archaeological findings of antiquities at Herculaneum and Pompeii, first published to a French audience in 1751, and the Lisbon earthquake in 1755. Natural disaster brought into relief the tenuous materiality of art. It catalyzed efforts to improve art conservation.³ In this context, Diderot leveraged writing's duplicatable, mobile, and discursive medium to conserve art. On the chance that art was destroyed, his *Salons*, through the power of description, would stand in for the absent image.

Such an argument expands past scholarship's scope of the *Salons*. Within existing literature, scholars have most often examined Diderot's *Salons* in the

contexts of art discourse and exhibitions. While the art world is an apt place to examine his works, this essay intends to broaden the scope of historical inquiry by situating his writing in the context of natural disasters. By approaching his *Salons* from outside the artistic milieu, I add to existing scholarship by positing that art criticism in France—and especially Diderot’s *Salons*—developed alongside a cultural consciousness of material durability. Writing about art offered a supplementary type of sustainability. It could conserve not only a literary description of the artwork but also the author’s *distinctive* experience of it. The remarkable verbosity of Diderot’s descriptions of art on display at the salon exhibitions demonstrate the power of writing as a tool for art conservation.

Countless scholars have studied the writing style of Diderot’s *Salons*. Many have analyzed the relationship between text and image, and specifically the practice of translating an image into text. Notably, the art historian Norman Bryson has argued that the perennial problem with translating image into text lies in the status of the signifier and the “intransigence or recalcitrance of the sign.”⁴ The difficulty to lucidly describe art resulted in, as Bryson hypothesizes, Diderot’s increased efforts in his later *Salons* to write about artistic technique instead. The art historian Andrew Clark has similarly examined the dialectical tension between word and image, but he considers Diderot’s writing style as suggestive of a linguistic turn, in which even images become a way to rethink language, categories of knowledge, and philosophies of nature.⁵

Several scholars have drawn links between Diderot’s prolixity and ekphrasis. In early Greek rhetoric, the term *ekphrasis* meant “an expression of words” whose “vivid and visual manner of describing intensifies the reader’s sense of being present to the scene or object, and brings about deeper imaginative and emotional involvement.”⁶ According to the historian of philosophy Gary Shapiro, ekphrasis methods vary depending on the author, time, and place. Shapiro argues that Diderot’s in-depth descriptions differ from other types of ekphrasis in history. Diderot did not adopt a master-pupil dialectic, as many ekphrastic poems had previously used. Rather, he wrote with a conversational and dialogical style, permitting his readers to imagine artworks and enter dialogue with him about them.⁷ While numerous scholars productively examine Diderot’s descriptions in relation to ekphrasis, few scholars have considered the physical longevity of ancient ekphrastic poems, which had survived in varying conditions and were widely duplicated by the eighteenth century. In a context in which natural disasters resulted in questions about material durability, it is worth considering how the survival of ancient writing may have encouraged the literary documentation of art in the eighteenth century. The material survival of books—and Diderot’s consciousness of their durability—is explored in this essay.

Recently, two scholars have examined Diderot's *Salons* in relation to materiality, destruction, and conservation. In *Futures and Ruins: Eighteenth-Century Paris and the Art of Hubert Robert* (2010), the art historian Nina Dubin discusses Diderot's meditations over the ruins of art.⁸ As she argues, what made eighteenth-century French culture "modern" was its "capacity to envision its own destruction."⁹ Writers such as Diderot imagined hypothetical catastrophes and sublime events that incited both morbid and pleasurable effects. The "allure for the unthinkable," as Dubin claims, exemplified a culture emancipated from absolutism and the subjection of the church.¹⁰ Diderot's *Salons* typify the unescapable, pleasurable, and "modern" thoughts about destruction in eighteenth-century French culture. Likewise, in "Diderot and the Materiality of Posterity" (2018), the art historian Oliver Wunsch examines Diderot's ideas about the longevity of art. Wunsch argues that Diderot envisioned poetic-description's potential to preserve art for posterity.¹¹ The reproducibility and dissemination of writing ensured the survival of artworks over time. Wunsch examines the lettered exchanges between Diderot and the sculptor Étienne-Maurice Falconet, who both debated posterity as motivation for artistic production of great pictures. Dubin and Wunsch emphasize the cultural value of posterity in eighteenth-century France.

However, less scholarly attention has been given to the context of geological destruction during the 1740s and 1750s in which the *Salons* were produced. By examining the historical conditions of natural disaster leading up to 1759, when Diderot wrote his first exhibition review, this essay explores his reasoning behind using text over image to conserve art for the future. I argue that Diderot's *Salons* were conceptualized as "documentation." The term *documentation*, by its modern definition, is a material that provides *official* information, evidence, or instructions about something.¹² Diderot's *Salons*, in their length and writing style, would afford a future audience necessary description to visualize art objects in their absence. Most important, his textual description would permit the conservation of *his* enlightened way of seeing. Text could fix the author's view of art and transmit—over time—the *period eye's* perceptual experience of it.¹³

Given the popularity of Diderot's *Salons* in art historical scholarship today, it is surprising to learn that in the eighteenth century they were privately circulated in manuscript to only a small number of European individuals through the German expatriate Friedrich Melchior, baron von Grimm's biweekly journal *Correspondance Littéraire*.¹⁴ There were many reasons for not publishing. It was, on a political level, a safeguard against censorship and imprisonment, which Diderot had experienced in 1749.¹⁵ The manuscripts were so covert that even his close friends likely did not know about them, such as Falconet.¹⁶ The decision to not publish was also an opportunity to write creatively and openly for an esteemed and distant clientele,

many of whom were potential buyers of art at the Parisian exhibitions, all the while maintaining Diderot's neutral political status at home.¹⁷ The choice to not publish on these grounds, however, seems suspicious, especially considering the unique cultural situation of mid-eighteenth-century Paris, a point that Bryson has highlighted. Bryson states that this period was an ideal milieu to widely disseminate the *Salons*.¹⁸ With the public's new interest in art coupled with Diderot's fame and knack for intelligible writing, the choice to privately circulate the *Salons*, for Bryson, was a missed opportunity, a "magnificent waste."

What might seem like a "magnificent waste" to not publish in Diderot's lifetime was actually a strategy of art conservation.¹⁹ The inaction—or, as I see it, *suspension*—of publishing the *Salons* fascinatingly calls into question Diderot's intended audience. Why document art extensively using the labor of manuscript for just a few individuals scattered throughout Europe? While we may never fully know Diderot's intentions, it is safe to assume that Diderot understood the publishing market well, and it is likely that he anticipated the publication of his *Salons* soon after his death. By funneling these documents into the hands of various enlightened individuals in Europe, he ensured their safekeeping and controlled their eventual publication in his own terms. The subsequent publications of these textual objects beginning in 1798, fourteen years after Diderot's death, supports such a speculation.²⁰ By first examining the materiality and discursivity of the *Salons*, and then by tracing the ecological motives behind their conception, I show that Diderot was less concerned about the *Salons* reaching a vast audience in his own time than he was anxious over documenting art, art technique, and eighteenth-century (and *his*) taste for the future.

Diderot's lengthy visual description of each artwork offers us a clue as to why we should rethink the function of the *Salons* as forms of "documentation," as textual records for an audience whose own physical—and temporal—distance could not guarantee the experience of art in situ. In Diderot's description of Joseph-Marie Vien's *Saint Denis Preaching the Faith in France*, shown at the Salon exhibition of 1767, Diderot alludes to his belief in the power of writing to catalog—and conserve—all dimensions of art (Fig. 1):

To give yourself an idea of this crowd occupying the left side of the painting, imagine a woman viewed from the back, crouching on the lowest steps, both her arms extended towards the saint in admiration. Behind her, on a lower step and somewhat further back, a kneeling man listens, leaning forward, his head, arms, shoulders, and back signaling acquiescence.²¹



Figure 1 Joseph-Marie Vien, *Saint Denis Preaching the Faith in France*, 1767, oil on canvas, Musée Fabre, Montpellier. Public domain.

Diderot describes Vien's composition in lucid detail: the placement and disposition of bodies, the gesture of limbs, the relation of figures with one another, and so forth. He uses engaging language to stimulate the reader's attention. The narrator of his *Salons*, presumably Diderot, addresses the readers: "Let's have another look at this composition." The author also encourages the readers to critique the imagined painting, asking them, "But don't you think that with a bit of genius it would have been possible to introduce the most extreme movement?" Such rhetorical devices operate to insert a distant reader into the realm of looking and public discourse.

Diderot's descriptions also have an authorial positionality that undergird uniquely *his* vision of contemporary art as the exclusive referent for future users. In his text, Diderot guides his audience's imagination of the absent image in a way that anchors perception. In other words, the reader is compelled to subsume Diderot's gaze: each step of description simultaneously describes the unfolding of

Diderot's eyes cast onto the painting, moving across, up and down, and focusing in and out. As the reader follows along, they imagine the artwork based off the cognitive sequence of Diderot's own experience. While this process of looking is inherently subjective, I believe Diderot's aim was actually to establish an official description, something that was less opinionated and truer to nature and could, through simple language, transmit information in a documentary-style format to readers of future centuries. This purpose is suggested at the beginning of the section on Vien's *Saint Denis*, when Diderot mentions his experience of the exhibition, stating "public opinion was divided over this picture by Vien." Diderot's description that follows this statement, which I have quoted above, thus ameliorates the "division" of opinion by emphatically and prolongingly rendering his writing as *the* official last word.

The length of Diderot's descriptive writing underscores the *Salons*' "documentation" style unlike most art critical pamphlets or catalogs written in mid-eighteenth-century Paris.²² For example, while Diderot's *Salons* adopted the writing organization of the salon exhibition *livrets*, the official catalogs sold to visitors at the royal exhibitions, his descriptions exceedingly surpassed the *livrets* in length. Diderot's commentary on French artist Joseph Vernet's series of landscapes in the *Salons* of 1767, one of the most commonly referenced sections in art historical scholarship, provides a striking comparison. Unlike the salon exhibition *livret*, composed of only a few words, Diderot's description uses nearly twenty thousand words.²³ The *livrets*'s short length was, on the part of the Academy, pragmatic and economical. They provided salon exhibition-goers with an affordable pamphlet to accompany their visit. Yet the comparative ratio of words used between the two documents is compelling. Diderot does not just describe art: he belabors writing about art with intensive formal analysis, interjections of his personal experience, and ideas about artistic technique. This contrast is also implicit if we compare his commentary with other art critical publications, such as with the writing of the eighteenth-century art critic Étienne La Font de Saint Yenne. By many accounts one of the more infamous critics of the period, La Font sought to inflect his salon exhibition critiques, written from 1747 to 1756, with his theories of art, but he did not describe artworks fully. Whereas both writers discuss contemporary French taste, it is Diderot's verbosity that sets his art criticism apart. One of the primary reasons for this writing style was to supply Grimm's distant and elite readership with ample descriptions of art. Yet this motive alone seems unconvincing, especially if we consider the painstaking efforts it took Diderot to write about nearly every artwork in the exhibition.

Beginning in 1737, the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture displayed several hundred paintings in the *salon carré* at the Louvre for six weeks in

the summer. Diverse audiences of many classes visited the state-driven exhibitions. During the run of the exhibition, Diderot's writing methodology consisted of visiting the exhibition every day, usually in the morning to avoid large crowds. There, he would write copious notes, interview artist acquaintances, and observe public reactions to contemporary art. Once the Salon exhibitions closed, the possibility of returning to view an artwork through direct experience was unlikely. Only a select number of individuals could revisit the artworks in private or royal collections.²⁴ After the close of the exhibition, every artwork from that point on had to be reconstructed from memory. Diderot's diligent in situ notes aided in the recall process of remembering each piece as he wrote in their absence. Writing after the close of the exhibition challenged his long-term memory, because he wrote his *Salons* in varying lengths of time. Diderot's *Salon* of 1765 took fifteen days, in time for Grimm to circulate the critiques swiftly for his readers, while Diderot's *Salon* of 1767 took over a year, from September 1767 to the end of 1768.²⁵ Diderot's scrupulous methods to write comprehensively about contemporary art, especially in art's absence, I suggest, was inspired by an intense desire to document art on the chance that art was destroyed by natural disasters.

Diderot's own words hint at destruction as incentive for the documentation of art through the medium of text. In the introduction to his *Salon* of 1765, in which he addresses his friend Grimm, he alludes to antiquity as a possible inspiration for his *Salons*:

I'll describe the paintings for you, and my descriptions will be just that, with a bit of imagination and taste, you'll be able to envision them spatially, disposing the objects within them more or less as we see them on the canvas; and to facilitate judgement about the grounds of my criticism or praise, I'll close the Salon with some reflections on painting, sculpture, printmaking, and architecture. You'll read me like an ancient author who transmits an ordinary passage instead of a finely wrought line.²⁶

As he states, Diderot's goal in writing the *Salons* was to provide enough visual analysis for his readers so that they could fully imagine each artwork's composition, color, technique, and affective qualities. His words transmit the complexity of vision into "ordinary" and legible discursive codes. Importantly, Diderot signals his rationale for writing with simple prose at the end of the passage, in which he says, "you'll read me like an ancient author." By analogizing himself with writers of the ancient past, with whom his own eighteenth-century existence stood at a temporal distance, he assumes that his *Salons* will be read by an audience with an equal degree

of time, thousands of years in the future. For textual meaning to transfer through time, across cultures and languages, it needed to be “ordinary” and easily translatable. Writing for a future audience required the mediation of a specific “ancient author,” Diderot, whose taste represented the whole of a century and whose writing could successfully deconstruct the intricacies of visual art into comprehensible words.

The proliferation of natural disasters in the eighteenth century likely motivated Diderot to document the century’s French art. In 1709, the earliest excavations at Herculaneum began near Portici, located in the Bay of Naples at the foot of an active, twelve-kilometers-wide volcano that Pliny the Elder called “fields of fire.”²⁷ When a laborer discovered ancient marbles in a well shaft in the courtyard of the Alcantarine monastery at Resina, he quickly sold these finds to the nearest nobleman, a French prince, Emmanuel Maurice de Lorraine, prince d’Elbeuf. The prince later purchased the site at Resina and continued to mine the land for ancient remnants, creating wells and radiating tunnels dug from 1709 to 1716. After stocking his home with his archaeological loot, Elbeuf ceased operations in 1716, and, for the next twenty years, till 1736, no one paid any further attention to the prince’s treasure. Yet his discoveries would no longer remain covert. When he smuggled objects out of Naples—notably three marble statues of female figures to Dresden—knowledge of these objects spread throughout Europe, and eventually the ruler of Naples, Charles VII, who would later become King Charles III of Spain, caught wind.²⁸

Having been ruthlessly exploited by the Austrian viceroyalty, Naples as an independent kingdom reacted with a paranoid fear of mistreatment by outsiders and instituted a policy on absolute domestic control.²⁹ The antiquities found at the buried cities of Herculaneum and later Pompeii would henceforth be hidden from foreigners, and all exclusive rights to the possession, knowledge, and publications of the finds were controlled by Charles VII.³⁰ Despite new measures of control, the archaeological sites had serious problems with theft and illegal exportation, leading Charles VII to declare that anything found there was his personal property and banned the export and images of the objects. This Neapolitan policy built an aura of exclusivity around the finds; only those with special permission from the court could visit the site, but not publish information about it.

The closure of the site to outsiders meant that the Neapolitan kingdom had exclusive control over the archaeological practices and the objects discovered. As the Neapolitan-elected archaeologist Ottavio Baiardi articulates, diplomatic and military conquests would shift its sights “within the viscera of the earth itself.”³¹ The king continued to mine the region and filled his own palace with numerous

finds. Yet the conduct of his excavations was decidedly criticized. For figures such as Horace Walpole and Camillo Paderni, who visited the site in 1740, local excavation efforts were deemed unplanned and destructive, stating:

The first mistake those men they call intendents [the engineers conducting the dig] have committed is their having dug out the pictures without drawing the situation of the place, that is, the niches where they stood: for they were all adorned with grotesques composed of most elegant masques, figures and animals; which, not being copied, are gone to destruction, and the like will happen to the rest. Then, if they meet with any pieces of painting not so well preserved as the rest, they leave them where they are found. Besides, there are pillars of stucco extremely curious, consisting of many sides, all variously painted, of which they do not preserve the memory.³²

Walpole's and Paderni's anxieties over archaeological malpractice reflect fears about the destruction of ancient art. When objects were extracted from their original context, the surrounding decorative wall-paintings were destroyed, and knowledge about display practices was lost, "gone to destruction." As a result, contemporary conservation principles intensified in the later 1740s and into the 1750s, when knowledge of Herculaneum and its archaeological negligence were exposed to the broader European public.

It was not until 1751 that the engraver and art theorist Charles-Nicolas Cochin and the architectural draftsman Jérôme-Charles Bellicard exposed the tightly held secret of Herculaneum and its excavations to a waiting international audience.³³ In November and December 1750, Cochin and Bellicard accompanied the marquis de Marigny to Naples, where they visited Herculaneum and Portici. The group secretly compiled notes and drawings and even likely convinced someone to smuggle building plans for them to copy.³⁴ Cochin quickly returned to Paris and published his descriptions titled "Lettre sur les peintures d'Herculanum: aujourd'hui Portici" anonymously and fictively "à Bruxelles" in the *Mercure de France*, a monthly gazette with an elite readership, in September 1751.³⁵ Cochin foregrounds his essay by repeatedly telling his readers that his drawings and descriptions about Herculaneum were made from memory. He describes the atmosphere of secrecy and his rapid drawing methods, stating:

Never forget that the etchings come from designs made from memory. While leaving to admire the prodigious number of ancient Paintings preserved in the palace of the king of the two Sicilies [Charles VII], I was only able to see the designs with great rapidity; it seems that the Neapolitans are convinced that too repeated looks could destroy them or cause them some damage.³⁶

For Cochin, the knowledge of antiquity's art and architecture justified his illegal efforts of documentation.

Herculaneum generated novel chemical innovations in art conservation and especially with experiments in varnish.³⁷ When objects at the archaeological site were excavated and exposed to light, their pigments often deteriorated quickly.³⁸ Chemists and artists used wax as a conservation material, because its chemical properties improved paint and acted as a varnish ingredient.³⁹ The comte de Caylus, a prominent figure in the arts, advocated for the public dissemination of art conservation practices and recipes, stating, "an honest man should never be suspected of depriving not only his country, but humanity in general, of a helpful invention."⁴⁰ Artists and craftsman were praised for opening up their workshops and unveiling their techniques. In 1754, the comte de Caylus published his discovery of classical encaustic paintings. During several sessions at the Académie de Peinture, he lectured on the "paintings of the Ancients." At the Académie des Inscriptions, he explained the artistic process of encaustic by demonstrating its process on an artwork by Vien.⁴¹ This technique would later become popular in neoclassical decors. By writing about art restoration techniques, written language would obviate the loss of tacit knowledge.

The palpability of natural disasters' impact on art and architecture escalated in 1755. On the morning of November 1, 1755—All Saints Day—an earthquake struck Lisbon, Portugal. This geological calamity killed thousands of people, many of whom were at prayer at the time of the disaster. For several months after, the earthquake resulted in subsequent seismic activity. Shocks vibrated throughout Europe, a huge tsunami followed a few hours after, and Lisbon went up in flames, causing further destruction and loss of life in the city. Damage stretched throughout Portugal all the way to Morocco. Abnormal geological, hydrographical, and meteorological occurrences extended as far north as Scotland and Sweden, and minor effects occurred in the West Indies and the western parts of America.⁴² Some research estimates that roughly sixteen million square kilometers—about 3 percent of the Earth's surface—were affected.⁴³ These events inspired Voltaire to contemplate the existence of evil in the world. In his *Poème sur le Désastre de Lisbonne, ou Examen de cet Axiome: "Tout est Bien,"* he states:

Run, contemplate these awful ruins,
 These debris, these shreds, these unhappy ashes,
 These women, these children piled on top of each other,
 Under these broken marbles lay dispersed members;
 A hundred thousand unfortunates that the earth devours,
 Who, bloody, torn, and still thrilling,
 Buried under their roofs, die without help,
 In the horror of the torments their lamentable days!
 At the half-formed cries of their expiring voices,
 At the frightening sight of their smoking ashes.⁴⁴

In his poem, Voltaire critiques the popular eighteenth-century belief that all is good and meant to be.⁴⁵ He returned to the subject of Lisbon's horrific events in *Candide*, published in 1759, the same year of Diderot's first *Salons*, in which the character Pangloss explains to the protagonist Candide that "all [was] for the very best." Ironically, Pangloss states this at the very same moment that a storm begins to brew while the two characters are en route to the doomed port of Lisbon.⁴⁶

Not only does Voltaire's poem illustrate the loss of human life, but it also sheds light on natural disaster's effects on objects and architecture. When he describes "broken marbles," Voltaire specifically chooses a durable material to enhance materiality's failure and to analogize Lisbon's destruction to the ruins of antiquity. The Lisbon earthquake underscored the precarious reality that objects were susceptible to ruin. Jacques-Philippe Le Bas's series of prints from 1757 show scenes of the earthquake's aftermath, which are void of artworks, wall tapestries, decorative objects, and furniture (Fig. 2). All that remains are crumbling, hollow architectural buildings. The perilous afterlife of objects amplified in the earthquake's aftermath, when ensuing mayhem resulted in an increase in looting throughout the city's ruins. A German print etched in 1755 shows culprits hanging from the gallows at the center of the print; apparently, more than thirty people were hung for looting objects after the destruction of the city (Fig. 3).⁴⁷

Voltaire's poem also draws attention to contemporary conceptions about earth's "devouring" force. Its natural and powerful agency became a popular subject of study among numerous theorists, including for the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In the span of roughly forty-eight years, from 1754 to 1802, Kant theorized natural disasters, ranging from the aging of the earth to fire, earthquakes, wind, physical geography, volcanoes, moons, and "fireballs."⁴⁸ Kant's *Theory of Earthquakes and Volcanic Action* (1756) responded to Lisbon's natural disaster and questioned the geological impact of minor earth tremors on movements of waters

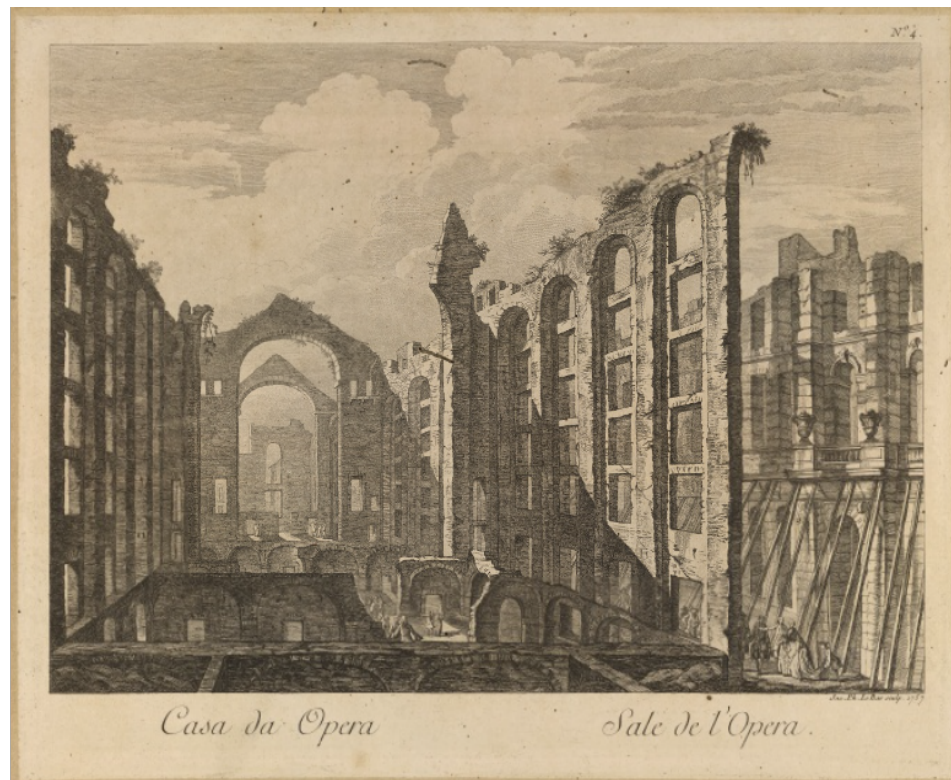


Figure 2 Jacques-Philippe Le Bas, *Collecção de algumas ruínas de Lisboa causadas pelo terremoto e pelo fogo do primeiro de novembro do anno 1755* (*Recueil des plus belles ruines de Lisbonne causées par le tremblement et par le feu du premier novembre 1755*), 1757, BnF Paris. Public domain.

and land.⁴⁹ Notably, Kant's rationale was premised upon the argument that nature alone caused disasters rather than a divine providence.

Diderot's *Salons* were conceived in 1759 and thus are historically inextricable from the conditions of natural disaster, art conservation, and posterity pervasive in this decade. He indicates the relationship in his commentary on Hubert Robert's *Large Gallery Lit from Its Far End* (*Salon* of 1767):

Wherever I cast my glance, the objects surrounding me announce death and compel my resignation to what awaits me. What is my ephemeral existence in comparison with that of a rock being worn down, of a valley being formed, of a forest that's dying, of these deteriorating masses suspended above my head? I see the marble of tombs crumble into powder, and I don't want to die!⁵⁰

Like nature and art, humans were subject to death and deterioration. Yet, Diderot suggests that not all materials disintegrate at the same rate. The life-worlds of



Figure 3 The Ruins of Lisbon, 1755, copperplate engraving. Courtesy of the National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering (NISEE), University of California, Berkeley. Original in Museu da Cidade, Lisbon. Museu da Cidade, Lisbon, also reproduced in O Teramoto de 1755, Testamunhos Britanicos (*The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, British Accounts*). Lisbon: British Historical Society of Portugal, 1990.

matter overlap, and they begin and end at varying intervals. I argue that text and image can be conceptualized similarly. While the two mediums converge at the biennial salon exhibitions, Diderot envisioned his *Salons* living longer. Future readers could view and imagine the ancient art of eighteenth-century France, not least by the discovery of its “antiquities,” but also, and even more so, through the ancient author Denis Diderot’s powerful pen.

When the artworks of the salon exhibitions were taken down, visitors far and near could remember the objects through printed reproductions or textual descriptions. However, while prints of artworks could imitate form and signify narrative, they could not conserve an image in other ways. Color printing remained a nascent innovation, and even with hand-enhanced colored prints, reproductions varied. Captions accompanying prints could mediate signification, and certain iconographies could be legible in the future. Yet, more sustained descriptions, such as in Diderot’s *Salons*, fastened culturally-specific meaning and taste to representation. In the absence of the image, Diderot’s description substituted visuality by detailing an artwork’s narrative, composition, scale, color, and paint handling.

Text also permitted Diderot to record his opinions. His *Salons* analyze all aspects of artworks, ranging from the viewer’s affect to visual elements such as “groups” and “masses.” When talking about Nicolas Poussin’s painting *The Manna* or, as it is titled today, *The Jews Gathering the Manna in the Desert* (1637), in relation



Figure 4 Nicolas Poussin, *The Jews Gathering the Manna in the Desert*, 1637, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Public domain.

to the idea of “groups” and “masses,” Diderot proclaims, “In my view, the three women to the left . . . do not form a group . . . a group always forms a mass; but a mass does not always **form** a group” (Fig. 4).⁵¹ Diderot describes for the readers the general subject of the painting, but he also lends insight into his own “view” about art, which may reflect broader eighteenth-century conceptions of composition. Taste, too, is also captured by Diderot’s pen. As he mentions, a “genuine imitator of nature, and the wise artist, will use groups economically.”⁵² He continues, “an excessive propensity for groups indicates decadence in a painting.”⁵³ Diderot’s opinions fix an artwork’s meaning and allow a future reader to understand eighteenth-century taste, as he admits, whether his writing is “true or false, the reader can always garner something from [my thoughts].”⁵⁴ Writing about art, thus, was a useful conservation method because of its immutable possibilities, especially when a future audience’s taste and customs were presumably different.

Though both art and paper were susceptible to natural disasters, Diderot’s usage of text to document art suggests the eighteenth-century belief in writing as a reliable medium. Text increased the chances of its own survival through scale, duplication, and dissemination.⁵⁵ Though Diderot’s *Salons* were not mass distributed in his lifetime, their circulation in Europe to various enlightened and elite individuals could ensure their safekeeping. The small scale of books permitted easy storage and trade. By scattering his manuscripts throughout different spaces and geographies, the *Salons*—and the memory of art—improved the likelihood of their

own posterity. If one location of one manuscript was subject to destruction or looting, the copies of the *Salons* elsewhere in Europe would continue to conserve eighteenth-century French art.

To an eighteenth-century European audience, writing's sustainable qualities were best exemplified by the ubiquitous existence of ancient texts present in this period. By the 1750s, ancient ekphrastic poetry, the ancient Greek practice of describing art, had outlived much of the artworks they described. This type of ancient writing was first coined in modern times in English in 1715.⁵⁶ Many eighteenth-century European readers knew of this poetic device, including Diderot, who referenced the subject regularly throughout his *Salons*.⁵⁷ For example, in the *Salons* of 1767, he references Homer's work many times, including the *Iliad*, one of the most well-known examples of ancient ekphrasis, in Diderot's section on the artist Vernet.⁵⁸ Ancient writings' abundancy presumably convinced Diderot and his contemporaries that writing could accomplish conservation better than the art conservation methods at the time.

There was, in eighteenth-century France, a consciousness about textual documentation as an art conservation tool. Questions of material durability were fundamental to the way in which people made, criticized, and thought about art in this period. Writing's easily duplicative and mobile properties could, in the face of natural disaster, uphold history when art and architecture failed to do so. Just as effortlessly as a book passes from hand to hand, so could the visual memory of an artwork live on, crossing physical and temporal boundaries. Most interestingly, Diderot's *distinctive* perception of art—the way his eyes cast onto an artwork, traced its composition, and delighted in the pleasurable experience of color—could simultaneously be documented for the future.

Delanie Linden is a PhD candidate in art history at MIT. She researches the history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French art and has long been fascinated by the historical intersections of art, science, and colonialism. Her dissertation, "Other Colors: Chroma, Chemistry, and the Orient," examines the relationship between imported colorant technologies and textiles and French Orientalist painting techniques during a period of French innovations in colorant chemistry between c. 1770 to 1858. She argues that the broader world of color—from colorant chemistry and global trade to textile production and color theory—permits a more expansive view of color's meaning and reception in early nineteenth-century French painting. Linden holds a BA in art history and neuroscience from the University of Michigan and an MA in art history from SMU. She has worked as a

curatorial intern at the University of Michigan Museum of Art and the DeGolyer Library, and has spent many years training and teaching oil painting and portraiture. She intends to become a professor of art history.

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Notes

¹ In this essay, Diderot’s *Salons* is italicized and capitalized, and the academy’s exhibitions are referenced as “salon exhibitions.”

² Kerr Houston, “Fragments of Artworks, Fire, and Loss in Diderot and Balzac,” *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 34, no. 3 (2015): 32. <https://doi.org/10.1086/sou.34.3.43287855> Houston argues that this opening description of van Loo’s work also functions as a eulogy, doubly referring to time, since van Loo had recently died. See also Alastair Davidson, “Denis Diderot and the Limits of Reason,” *Diderot Studies* 22 (1986): 41–42, who argues that Diderot’s usage of “hypothesis” in his discussion on van Loo is complicated by Diderot’s belief that knowledge is derived from the senses and experience. See Diderot’s article on “hypothèse” in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, vol. 3, edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert, University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, Spring 2021 edition, edited by Robert Morrissey and Glenn Roe, 417.

³ Recently, scholars have examined the technical history of art and conservation. See, e.g., Noémie Étienne, *The Restoration of Paintings in Paris, 1750–1815: Practice, Discourse, Materiality*, translated by Sharon Grevet (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2017); and Sarah Lowengard, *The Creation of Color in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). The discipline of art conservation in France coincided with the events of natural disaster and the archaeological findings at Herculaneum and Pompeii. In this context, French scientists and artists concocted hundreds of new recipes with the aim of inventing durable art materials. The success of these measures, however, as Lowengard and Étienne have recently shown, were few and far between: varnish yellowed; colorants faded; and chemical mixtures eroded over time.

⁴ Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1981), 195.

⁵ See Andrew H. Clark, "Diderot's Encyclopedic Poetics," *The Eighteenth Century* 53, no. 1 (2012): 102. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecy.2012.0009> See also Daniel Brewer, *The Discourse of Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century France: Diderot and the Art of Philosophizing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). His vast analysis of Diderot's larger corpus also examines the function of Diderot's *Salons* language. He argues that in the *Salons*, Diderot constantly grapples with the problem of producing theoretical discourse.

⁶ Romira Worvill, "From Prose Peinture to Dramatic Tableau: Diderot, Fénelon, and the Emergence of the Pictorial Aesthetic in France," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 39 (2010): 151, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sec.0.0055>.

⁷ Gary Shapiro, "The Absent Image: Ekphrasis and the 'Infinite Relation' of Translation," *Journal of Visual Culture* 6, no. 1 (2007): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412907075065>. See also Mary D. Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 54. According to Sheriff, Diderot's ekphrastic-like writing was not simply translations of image into text; it also "recreated" Diderot's experience of looking.

⁸ Nina Dubin, *Futures and Ruins: Eighteenth-Century Paris and the Art of Hubert Robert* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2010).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

¹¹ Oliver Wunsch, "Diderot and the Materiality of Posterity," *Early Modern French Studies* 40, no. 1 (2018), 63–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20563035.2018.1473113>. Wunsch claims that Diderot was fascinated by the material properties that ensured art's longevity.

¹² Lexico Dictionaries, Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "documentation," accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/documentation>.

¹³ Michael Baxandall, "The Period Eye," in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 29–39.

¹⁴ Melissa Hyde, *Making Up the Rococo: François Boucher and His Critics* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2006), 3. Grimm was the editor of the journal, though sources typically call it "Grimm's *Correspondance Littéraire*."

¹⁵ By the end of the 1750s, harsh and honest art criticism affected the economy of art and the livelihood of artists dependent on dealer networks and commissions in Paris and abroad. Authorities sought to suppress unregulated art criticism, yet many writers, including Diderot, resorted to clandestine means of dissemination. See Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

¹⁶ Hyde, *Making Up the Rococo*, 3.

¹⁷ Joseph R. Smiley, “The Subscribers of Grimm’s Correspondence Littéraire,” *Modern Language Notes* 62, no. 1 (1947): 44, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2908676>. Grimm’s readership included the Russian empress, the queen of Sweden, the king of Poland, the duchess of Saxe-Gotha, the duke of Deux-Ponts, the crown princess of Hesse-Darmstadt, the prince Georg of Hesse-Darmstadt, and the princess of Nassau-Saarbruck. See also Shane Agin, “The Development of Diderot’s ‘Salons’ and the Shifting Boundary of Representational Language,” *Diderot Studies* 30 (2007): 14, who remarks on the opportunity for Diderot to have the freedom to write creatively.

¹⁸ Bryson, *Word and Image*, 154.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ In this passage, he addresses the reader with an ambiguous “vous,” expanding the original one-on-one dialogue between Diderot and Grimm to an infinite discursive space between the author and *all* readers.

²² See Richard Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism: From the Ancien Régime to the Restoration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 3.

²³ See the Wikisource digitized transcription of Diderot’s “Vernet” section in *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot XI*: https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Salon_de_1767/Promenade_Vernet.

²⁴ Thomas Crow, introduction to *The Salon of 1767*, vol. 2 of *Diderot on Art*, edited by John Goodman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), xvi.

²⁵ Crow, introduction, xv.

²⁶ Goodman, *Salon of 1767*, 6.

²⁷ Mark Greenburg, ed., *Antiquity Recovered: The Legacy of Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2007), 15. Vesuvius erupted in the fall of 79 CE. According to Alison E. Cooley and M. G. L. Cooley, *Pompeii and Herculaneum: A Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1–2, Herculaneum and Pompeii—two separate towns—were ruined by the volcanic eruption in distinct ways and therefore have a different archaeological record. The town of Herculaneum, six kilometers from the volcano’s crater, suffered a speedy destruction. Pompeii was destroyed hours later given its more southern position next to the eruption. While Herculaneum was completely covered instantly, which also helped preserve it, Pompeii’s roofs were first stacked with ash then covered only partially. Pliny the Elder, who lived from 23 to 79 CE, died in this eruption, and his nephew, Pliny the Younger, recorded twenty-five years later what he had witnessed on the day of the eruption while standing at a distance in Misenum in the Bay of Naples.

²⁸ The antiquarian Johann Joachim Winckelmann viewed the marbles in Dresden.

²⁹ Greenburg, *Antiquity Recovered*, 39.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 38. The former Habsburgs were linked to the Farnese lineage of Carlo Borbone of Spain and the kingdom of Naples.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 42.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁴ See Hyde, *Making Up the Rococo*, 7. The marquis de Marigny was Madame de Pompadour's brother, and after these expeditions to Herculaneum, he became the directeur-général des bâtiments du roi from 1751 to 1774. Charles-Nicolas Cochin was Marigny's artistic mentor and adviser. Cochin was also a draftsman and engraver and, during Marigny's administration, was the secrétaire de l'Académie. See also Greenburg, *Antiquity Recovered*, 46.

³⁵ Charles-Nicolas Cochin, "Lettre sur les peintures d'Herculanum: aujourd'hui Portici," *Mercur de France* ([fictitiously dated Brussels, January 20, 1751] September 1751), 171–83. Afterward, Cochin reworked this publication for his contribution to a book he coauthored with Bellicard, first published in 1753.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 173. "N'oubliez jamais que les eaux fortes viennent d'après des desseins faits de mémoire, en sortant d'admirer le nombre prodigieux de Peintures antiques conserves dans le palais du roi des deux Siciles, et que l'on fait voir avec une si grande rapidité, qu'il semble que les Napolitains soient persuadés que les regards trop répétés pourroient les détruire ou leur porter quelque dommage."

³⁷ Étienne, *Restoration of Paintings in Paris*, 97.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 30. See also A.-C.-P. Caylus and M. Majaut, docteur de la faculté de médecine en l'université de Paris, *Mémoire sur la peinture à l'encaustique et sur la peinture à la cire* (Geneva, 1755), 23.

⁴⁰ Étienne, *Restoration of Paintings in Paris*, 30.

⁴¹ Marc Fumaroli, "The Comte de Caylus and the 'Return to Antiquity' in the Eighteenth Century," in *Republic of Letters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 287, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5cg9v1.22>.

⁴² O. Reinhardt and D. R. Oldroyd, "Kant's Theory of Earthquakes and Volcanic Action," *Annals of Science* 39 (1982): 248, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00033798300200221>. If one types "Lisbonne" into Google Ngram Viewer, the graphic of 1700–1800 in French shows a striking rise in the word in the 1750s: https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=lisbonne&year_start=1700&year_end=1800&corpus=19&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Clisbonne%3B%2Cc0_

⁴³ O. Reinhardt and D. R. Oldroyd, "Kant's Thoughts on the Ageing of the Earth," *Annals of Science* 39 (1982), 248.

- ⁴⁴ Ibid. “Tout est bien” references Alexander Pope’s dictum “whatever is, is right.”
- ⁴⁵ See the work of Pope (1688–1744), whose poetry inspired theological and fateful thoughts about the world as always good.
- ⁴⁶ Voltaire, *Candide*, translated by Lowell Bair (New York: Bantam Dell, 2003), 25.
- ⁴⁷ Harsh K. Gupta and Vineet K. Gahalaut, *Three Great Tsunamis: Lisbon (1755), Sumatra-Andaman (2004), and Japan (2011)* (London: Springer, 2013), 28.
- ⁴⁸ See table of contents of Eric Watkins, ed., *Immanuel Kant: Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- ⁴⁹ Reinhardt and Oldroyd, “Kant’s Theory of Earthquakes and Volcanic Action,” 250.
- ⁵⁰ Goodman, *Salon of 1767*, 198–99.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 37.
- ⁵² Ibid., 38.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 39.
- ⁵⁵ By “immutable” and “mobile,” I reference the terms used by Bruno Latour, “Visualization and Cognition: Drawing Things Together,” in *Knowledge and Society Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present*, edited by H. Kuklick (Stamford, CT: Jai, 1986), 1–40, <https://doi.org/10.22394/0869-5377-2017-2-95-151>.
- ⁵⁶ James A. W. Heffernan, “Ekphrasis and Representation,” *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 297, <https://doi.org/10.2307/469040>.
- ⁵⁷ Countless eighteenth-century French writers and artists reference antiquity, and many referenced ancient writers who were most well known for ekphrasis, such as Homer.
- ⁵⁸ Goodman, *Diderot on Art*, 115.