

Historic, religious paintings evoke resplendent era

By Emily Morrison

Visitors to the newly expanded Memorial Art Gallery's first major exhibition will be charmed and delighted by the 13-inch canvas of a youthful John the Baptist, a lyrical rendering so light-hearted as to appear almost insubstantial. This winsome work by Jean-Honore Fragonard hardly seems representative of the majestic scale and sober, didactic tone associated with the phenomenon of 18th-century French history painting known as *la grande maniere* — the grand style.

The current MAG exhibition of 60 paintings loaned by 35 American and French collections — "*La Grande Maniere: Historical and Religious Painting in France, 1700-1800*" — features primarily the large-scale, complex figural paintings of the period, which has been more widely remembered by art historians for the delicate genre scenes, still lifes and erotic paintings of the more frivolous Rococo style.

The first exhibition of its kind to be mounted in the United States, "*La Grande Maniere*" focuses renewed critical attention on the religious and historical (and, although not included in this exhibition, mythological and literary) subject matter mandated for history painters by the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. Known as *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* after 1797, this 18th- and 19th-century French governmental institution effectively dictated not only whether an artist of the period had any future in the field, but even what subjects he or she was permitted to paint for exhibition. Not only was there a hierarchy of genres — by which large-scale, narrative "history paintings" were held in higher regard than portraiture, landscape, or still life — but the Academy system centered on a series of prescribed steps for admission, and even assigned subjects for the prestigious annual *Prix de Rome* competition.

Fragonard, the greatest genre painter of the latter half of the century, opted out of the academic system before he could ever be formally "received" as a member, even though his early work had shown great promise of an eventual career in history painting. Instead of electing to paint grand, decorative works commissioned for public buildings and churches, Fragonard decided to pursue a private career as a painter of genre scenes (scenes of everyday life, dominated by the human figure in action) and *boudoir* scenes.

Curator Donald Rosenthal cites 'the high aims set for painting in an earlier age: to instruct, to inspire, and to touch the conscience through the moral force of art.'

Consequently, one Fragonard work that you definitely will not see in the current MAG exhibition is a whimsical piece commissioned by a young man who asked the artist to paint his mistress being pushed on a swing by an imaginary bishop. This type of frivolous scene "is what one usually thinks of when one thinks of Fragonard," according to Donald Rosenthal, curator of the MAG exhibition, who spoke on the subject of French history painting in the gallery auditorium on Tuesday, May 5, several days after the exhibition opened.

"*La grande maniere* was considered to be the highest rank of art because of its complexity and moral overtones," explained Rosenthal, chief curator at the High Museum in Atlanta and former chief curator at the Memorial Art Gallery. Rosenthal began assembling the exhibition under the tutelage of former gallery director Bret Waller and completed it after current director Grand Holcomb III assumed the position. The curator returned to Rochester to present an illustrated overview of the exhibit for the gallery's Charlotte Whitney Allen Lecture Series.

Rosenthal's exhibition catalogue essay on the subject establishes the historical and religious painting of 18th-century France as a vital link between the heroic age dominated by the great 17th-century Baroque painter Nicolas Poussin and the emergence of Neoclassicism during the latter part of the 18th



Nicolas Colombel, 'The Adoration of the Magi,' Salon of 1704. Oil on canvas, 45 x 58½ in., New Orleans Museum of Art.

century, according to Holcomb's foreword to the catalogue essay.

Indeed, as Rosenthal elaborated in both the essay and his gallery lecture, 18th-century history painting bridged the apparent gap between the Baroque and Neoclassical periods not only in terms of style and subject matter, but also with regard to moral tone and content. Religious themes figure prominently in the transition from the era of Poussin to that of the French Revolution, which effectively banished religious subjects for a certain period of time by disestablishing the Catholic Church.

Poussin's planar arrangement of figures across the foregrounds of his paintings prefigured the 18th-century emphasis on similar figural tableaux, and his use of dramatic gesture and expression had a decided influence on those who followed him, according to Rosenthal. The tradition of the *exemplum virtutis* — defined by art historian Robert Rosenblum as the work of art intended to teach a lesson in virtue — was exemplified in paintings based on events from Greek and Roman history as well as the lives of the saints or other stories from biblical history.

"Whereas 18th-century painters were trying to convey a message of 'virtue rewarded,' for example, that was not the case with Poussin, who was simply trying to express the passion of the moment he was capturing," noted Rosenthal during his gallery lecture. By contrast, the didactic nature of history painting in 18th-century France progressed from religious subjects toward a predominance of classical Greek and Roman subjects until, "at its climax during the Revolution, it (became) inseparable from political propaganda," as Rosenthal observed in his catalogue essay.

The evolution of religious painting throughout the period was not treated independently by Rosenthal, who decided to limit the exhibition to religious and historical subjects and omit the mythological and literary themes that also characterized the genre of history painting.

"This distinction is somewhat arbitrary: some mythological subjects popular in the (18th) century (*Hercules Choosing Between Vice and Virtue*, *The Death of Alcestis*) clearly were meant to ennoble and instruct, while some biblical themes (*Lot and his Daughters*, *Susannah and the Elders*) were aimed (despite pious claims) mainly at titillation," wrote Rosenthal in his catalogue essay. The curator's intention, however, was not to deny the prestige accorded mythological and literary subjects, but rather to highlight the didactic

aim more readily evident in the religious and historical works of the period.

Although the monarchic commission of large public works had become, by the advent of the 18th century, "a casualty of Louis XIV's costly military adventures," in Rosenthal's words, two large royal projects — both commissioned for church decoration — continued during the first decade of the century. The chapel, nave vault and tribune of the Chapelle Royale at Versailles were painted by Charles de La Fosse, Antoine Coyppel and Jean Jouvenet, respectively. The vaults of Saint Louis des Invalides in Paris were painted by La Fosse, Jouvenet, Noel Coyppel, Bon and Louis de Boullogne and Michel Corneille.

Also typical of the period was the commissioning by individual churches of large sets of matched canvases from a single artist, such as the *Life of Saint Augustine* series painted by Carle Van Loo for the church of Notre-Dame-des-Victoires in Paris. Commissions for biblical or history compositions were also made by the Gobelins tapestry works, which used such works as cartoons for luxury tapestries.

Such acknowledged masters of the Rococo style as Antoine Watteau, Francois Boucher and the irreverent Fragonard did occasionally paint religious subjects, although many of Watteau's were lost to posterity, and both Boucher and Fragonard "preferred to avoid dramatic or tragic themes in their religious paintings," as Rosenthal wrote in his essay. Yet Boucher's idiosyncratic "Virgin and Child" certainly ranks as one of the most charming — and, at the same time, disquieting — paintings in the entire MAG exhibition.

At the height of the Rococo period, during the heyday of the *boudoir* scene, the celebrated painter of religious pieces, Jean Restout, completed the arresting work entitled "The Death of St. Scholastica," a canvas so large that it isn't frequently placed on public display (and, understandably, is not included in the MAG exhibition). The painting, said Rosenthal, "came out of the tradition of the Baroque in Italy, but was very restrained . . . Yet you do find strongly felt religious paintings throughout the 18th century — until the Revolution, when it became unwise to do religious paintings, at least for awhile."

By the closing decades of the century, the Neoclassical style exemplified by such masters as Jacques-Louis David had begun to gain ascendancy, and paintings of contemporary history took their place alongside those of classical subjects. Still, a few intrepid



Francois Boucher, 'Virgin and Child.' Oil on canvas, oval, 17 x 13½ in. Signed (lower right, on chair arm): Boucher. The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

history painters continued to produce religious works, including Jean-Baptiste Regnault's "Descent from the Cross" in 1789, the year of the Revolution itself.

"Especially as the century wore on," said Rosenthal, "there really wasn't much of a distinction between the treatment by history painters of classical and religious subjects." Napoleon eventually signed the Concordat of 1801 with Pope Pius VII, thereby re-establishing the Catholic Church. "Then it became more fashionable to paint religious subjects again," commented Rosenthal, who added that the early Romantic period — from approximately 1805 to 1820 — witnessed a noticeable return to religion in post-revolutionary France. "It was really something of a turnaround," Rosenthal concluded.

Admirers of religious art won't want to miss the exhibition's series of distinct treatments of the subject of "Joseph Recognized by his Brothers" (by Charles-Antoine Coyppel, Charles Meynier and Jean-Charles Tardieu), the striking portrait of St. Theresa of Avila by Joseph-Marie Vien, "Saint Hymer in Solitude" by Jean Restout, Jean Jouvenet's riveting and brilliantly colored "The Deposition" or a very affecting pair of studies of St. Gregory by Carle Van Loo. "*La Grande Maniere*" will be on display in the gallery's temporary exhibition space through July 26. In September, the exhibition will travel to the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, and then in December to the High Museum of Art in Atlanta.