

## Terms and Concepts: The Academy of Art



### DETAILED VIEW:

#### Background

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, academies - and their "academic" style - became focuses of dissent among many modern artists seeking to develop new styles. Yet, for centuries, the idea of the academy - a place where artists could obtain instruction and exhibit their work - commanded respect. Before their growth, the medieval guild had supplied a trade association for artists who regarded themselves principally as craftsmen. During the Renaissance, however, the status of the artist was raised to that of an individual both technically *and* intellectually gifted. Artists began to see themselves as the peers of philosophers and poets (Raphael included himself in his famous gathering *The School of Athens* (1509-10)), and academies came into being to provide the new kind of multifaceted education that was required.

#### Training

The training received in the traditional academy concentrated on drawing from antique statuary and live models. The image of artists "drawing from life," or discoursing in front of a live model, has become a classic academy scene (such as in Johann Zoffany's *The Academicians of the Royal Academy* (1771-2)). Artists also learned subjects such as history, since history painting - which borrowed subjects from literature, mythology, the bible, and history itself - was widely regarded as the most demanding genre. Although the academies also produced skilled portraitists and still life painters, such genres were held in lower regard.



## **The French Academy**

The most influential European academy was the *Academie Royale de Peintre et de Sculpture*, which was founded in Paris in 1648. Soon after its establishment it became devoted to the glorification of Louis XIV, and the connection between centralized academies and the state remained important as they spread across Europe in the 18th century. Academies were vital in fostering national schools of painting and sculpture, and they remained pinnacles of aspiration for most artists long into the 19th century.

## **The Academy Exhibition**

An important function of the academy was to provide artists with a regular exhibition venue. Since the authority of the academies lent considerable authority to these juried shows, they often became the most important event in the exhibition calendar. This in turn lent further weight to the academies as arbiters of popular taste. The most famous example of this is the biannual exhibition of the French academy, the Salon, so-called because it was initially held in the Salon Carre of the Palace of the Louvre. The Salon was the most important regular exhibition in Europe throughout the late 18th and 19th centuries. The story of its decline is intertwined with that of the rise of modern art.

## **The Academy vs. Modern Art**

In the wake of Romanticism, many artists began to question centralized authority, including that represented by the academy. And, by the late 19th century many artists were rejecting authority entirely; indeed it is arguable that in its early stages modern art came to define itself by opposition to "academic" art - "academic" becoming a term of abuse for all that was old and moribund. Today, with the state having withdrawn from large-scale patronage, and official exhibition venues having lost ground to a variety of public museums and commercial galleries, art schools have also moved on. Most have all but abolished life drawing classes, and many are sceptical of the value of any formal and prescribed training whatsoever.



**Content written by:**

[Morgan Falconer](#)