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Frédérique Desbuissons

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The Studio and the Kitchen: Culinary Ugliness as Pictorial Stigmatisation in Nineteenth-Century France

'Man is what he eats [Der Mensch ist was er isst]'. What a scurrilous expression of modern sensualistic pseudo-wisdom!

Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach



1. Nadar [pseudonym of Félix Tournachon], *Nadar jury au Salon de 1857*. Paris, Librairie Nouvelle, 1857, p. 40: 'Don't you think the Razzia by M. Loubon looks a bit like spilled meat and cabbage soup?'

Cuisine and Painting: Two Intersecting Histories

Food and its various culinary manipulations constituted the essential vehicle of criticism of formal elements of painting in nineteenth-century France. From the 1860s to 1880s, culinary ugliness was a leitmotif and the primary expression of the death of painting in nineteenth-century criticism after illness and dirt. This anxiety reached its height in certain reactions triggered by modern art. Of course, the association of cooking and painting has a long history in Europe. Since the Middle Ages, painting has been closely related to culinary practices, both literally and metaphorically. Still today, words like *léché* (licked, or overfinished) or *croûte* (crust) bear witness to the role of the dietary in ways we speak about painting. This vocabulary comprises around one hundred words in French, which are

common to both cuisine and painting or slide from one domain to the other. The significance of this terminology, as this essay will demonstrate, is not only quantitative, but also programmatic: it embodies fear and hopes attending 'advanced' painting.

The parallel of culinary and painterly references emerges from shared practices and values – in short, histories. A noteworthy example is Cennino Cennini's fourteenth-century *Treatise on Painting*, which lists a large number of utensils and procedures common to the painter and the cook.¹ Three centuries later, the young artisan, Claude Gellée, was able to progress easily from pastry-maker to picture-maker.² Recent studies have also shed light on the importance of culinary themes in the development of genre painting in the late sixteenth century.³ But the division between artists and artisans progressively marginalised the longstanding proximities between food and painting. The subsequent devaluation of

This article is a revised version of a paper presented to the session *Ugliness as a challenge to art history* organized by Andrei Pop and Mechtild Widrich at the 2011 AAH Conference in Warwick. I would like to thank Andrei and Mechtild who helped me to improve this text, as well as my colleagues and friends: Ting Chang, Frank Claustrat, Elaine Williamson and Pamela Warner. A first version of this paper had been presented to the seminar *La laideur comme norme, formes, représentations* at the University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne in November 2010.

¹ The materials, utensils and gestures shared by the painter and the cook in Cennino Cennini's treatise have been underlined by Delphine Lesbros: 'Rhétorique de la recette dans le *Libro del arte* de Cennino Cennini', paper presented at the *Rencontres de l'honnête volupté*, Paris, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 28 March 2008.

² According to Joachim von Sandrart's *Teutsche Academie* (1675-1679), the young apprentice-pastry maker Claude Gellée came to Italy to continue his training; he was later hired as a cook and a handyman by the landscapist Agostino Tassi. The early years of Claude Gellée are poorly documented, and Sandrart's statements have never been confirmed.

³ See Sheila McTighe, 'Foods and the Body in Italian Genre Paintings about 1580: Campi, Passarotti, Carracci', *The Art Bulletin* 86 (June 2004), pp. 301-323; and more recently Valérie Boudier, *La Cuisine du peintre. Scène de genre et nourriture au Cinquecento*. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010.

work in the studio reached its height during the late eighteenth century, when culinary practices were evoked merely in art discourse to reduce art to a manual craft. Thus, in November 1792, the painter and member of the National Convention, Jacques-Louis David, explained to the minister Roland that there was no need to maintain the position of director of the *École de Rome* – a post to which David's close enemy, 'Suvée the cockroach', had just been elected – arguing that 'the younger artists knew more than the director, and the best director was [nothing more than] a good cook'.⁴

This devaluation found a theoretical justification in the hierarchy of the senses deriving from antiquity, where taste and smell were ranked below the noble, abstract and spiritual senses of sight and sound.⁵ Ranking the senses not only determined their aesthetic value but also their social uses, as Alain Corbin has demonstrated in his study of the nineteenth-century sensory imagination. The same hierarchy shapes the representations of society and its different components, and the ordering of the senses can be related to the classing of individuals:

'The way in which individuals made use of touch, smell, hearing and sight made it possible to distinguish two groups: the first were in constant contact with the inertia of matter, were accustomed to exhausting toil, and were spontaneously capable of feeling with their flesh an animal pleasure, produced by contact; the second, thanks to their education in and habit of social commerce, and their freedom from manual labour, were able to enjoy the beauty of an object, demonstrate delicacy, subdue the

⁴ Jacques-Louis David, letter to François Topino-Lebrun, 24 December 1792, in Jacques Louis Jules David, *Le Peintre Louis David*. Paris: Havard, 1880, p. 121 (translation by Edward Payne).

⁵ Martial Guédron, 'Physiologie du bon goût. La hiérarchie des sens dans les discours sur l'art en France au XVIII^e siècle' in Ralph Dekoninck, Agnès Guiderdoni-Bruslé, Nathalie Kremer (eds.), *Aux limites de l'imitation. L'ut pictural poesis à l'épreuve de la matière (XVI^e-XVIII^e siècles)*. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2009, p. 39-49.

instinct of the affective senses, and allow the brain to establish a temporal gap between desire and its gratification.'⁶

Critics and caricaturists, whose activity combined visual and intellectual skills, had all the more reason to adopt these representations.

Culinary Ugliness as a 'style'

Since the late eighteenth century, negative references to culinary activities have punctuated the history of art as well as social practices. Examples may be found in literature (where authors would engage in a certain genre *alimentaire* only to earn their bread and butter), in the theatre (when a performance would *faire un four* or 'flop'), and in politics (with the *cuisine électorale* or fishy electoral practices). These references, however, acquired a particular sharpness in the second half of the nineteenth century, when ingredients, preparations and meals became important signs of ugliness when judging contemporary painting.

The combination of these representations soon formed a *topos*: culinary ugliness. It concerned not represented ugliness – ugly objects or Ugliness as an idea – but, rather, the ugliness of painting: of works whose appearance was considered unpleasant (*désagréable*) to look at, or otherwise revolting (*repoussant*), as the word was generally understood in France since the seventeenth century.⁷ The focus of this essay is thus the *experience* as

⁶ Alain Corbin, 'Histoire et anthropologie sensorielle' (1990), reprinted in *Le Temps, le Désir et l'Horreur* (1991), Eng. trans. 'A History and Anthropology of the Senses' in *Time, Desire and Horror: Towards a History of the Senses*. Cambridge/Oxford: Polity Press, 1995, p. 181-195 (quotation p. 191-192).

⁷ From the end of the seventeenth century, French dictionaries testify to the aesthetic inflection of the adjective *laid*: the *Dictionnaire universel* by Antoine Furetière (1690) and the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française dédié au Roy* (1694) define 'laid' respectively as 'qui a une figure, ou des qualités désagréables à la veuë, ou à l'idée que nous nous sommes formées du beau' and 'Il

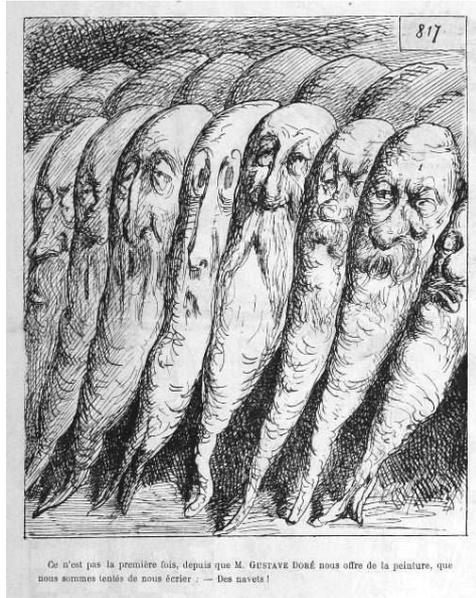
distinguished to the *theory* of ugliness. It will be shown that, in the critical literature published during the Salon, the use of culinary formulae and imagery constituted one of the principal ways of assessing what in a work of art is a failure. The word 'ugly' appears only rarely in this context. It is as if Romanticism, then Realism, by legitimising the aesthetics of ugliness, had imposed on anyone who attempted to express an experience of the ugly to resort to indirect representations. The discourse on taste in the Eighteenth century have also led in this direction.⁸ The dietary function, which encompasses the act of eating as well as everything that precedes and follows it, offers the *salonniers* a vast gamut of vulgar references and motifs, and the means of transmitting their experience of a non-picturesque and non-heroic ugliness. Aiming neither to invert the classical norms, nor to extend the limits of beauty, ugliness is simply experienced as the negation of art. In the second half of the nineteenth century, this bad painting, without any transcendence, is incarnated by cuisine.

The manifestations of this *topos* were at once verbal and iconic, serious and parodic. They can be found in criticism and caricatures, as well as in contemporary art theory, correspondence between artists and in numerous anecdotal sources which comprise the so-called *littérature artistique*, or art literature. Unlike the ugliness of reality, a crucial leitmotif for the enemies of Gustave Courbet in the 1850s, culinary ugliness was exploited by the champions of academic art as well as by the defenders of modernism. The theme

se dit aussi généralement de tout ce qui est désagréable aux yeux dans son genre'. This last definition is reprinted in all subsequent editions of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie*, 1718 to 1879. See *Dictionnaires des 16^e et 17^e siècles* and *Corpus des dictionnaires de l'Académie française (du 17^e-20^e siècle)*. Paris: Classiques Garnier Numérique, 2007.

⁸ On the notion of taste and its evolution between seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see Viktoria von Hoffmann's thesis, *Goûter le monde. Pour une histoire culturelle du goût à l'époque moderne*, Université de Liège, 2010.

proved eminently flexible and adaptable to various situations, its only requirement being a sensually conspicuous object. The images by André Gill and Cham, two caricaturists of opposing aesthetics and ideological parties, display a range of associations between food and painting (Figs. 2, 3).

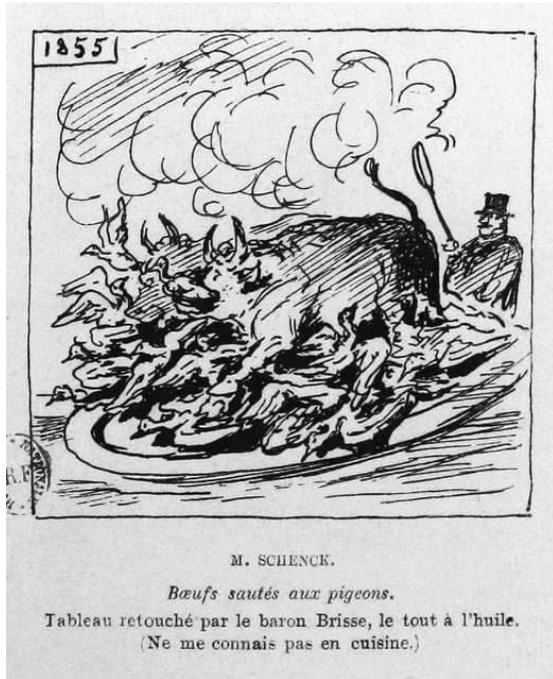


2. André Gill [pseudonym of Louis Alexandre Gosset de Guines], *Gill-Revue* n°1, 1868: 'Ce n'est pas la première fois, depuis que M. Gustave Doré nous offre de la peinture, que nous sommes tentés de nous écrier : Des navets !'

Gill's caricature of *Le Néophyte* by Gustave Doré (Salon of 1868) comparing monks in prayer to pale, withered vegetables, mixes visual and verbal metaphors, as well as formal allusions and puns: a coward was said to have 'the blood of turnips in his veins', and the whole painting is a 'turnip', or, in slang, a weakling.⁹ Cham, on the other hand, uses the rhetoric of the recipe to debase the composition of Auguste Schenck's *Pigeons et laboureurs* (Salon of 1876). He plays on the slippage between the oil of the painter and the oil of the cook, and relates both to the tutelary figure of Baron Brisse, a famous *gastronome* during the Second Empire whose notoriety had principally been established by the *petite presse*.¹¹

⁹ For metaphors of the turnip, see *Trésor de la langue française*. *Navet*, in the sense of a failed work of art, has been used from the Restoration onwards.

¹¹ Léon Brisse (20 September 1813-13 July 1876) wrote regular columns on gastronomy signed 'Baron Brisse' in several newspapers during the Second Empire. He retired in Fontenay-aux-Roses



3. Cham [pseudonym of Amédée Charles Henri de Noé], 'Le Salon pour rire', *Le Charivari*, 19 May 1876: 'Mr Schenck: *Beef sautéed with pigeons*. Painting retouched by the Baron Brisse, all in oil (don't know a thing about cooking)'

The number, variety and omnipresence of these motifs, which were developed by very different authors, lead me to suggest that culinary ugliness was the dominant 'style' of ugliness in French art, and especially in painting, between the 1850s and 1880s.¹²

A Critical Category

Culinary ugliness is, above all, a critical category. It takes the form of an aesthetic judgement using vocabulary, expressions, metaphors and images, which offer a negative assessment of painting. The slang of the studios was crammed with pejorative words,

(south of Paris) at the beginning of the Third Republic, and died in July 1876. For Baron Brisse and his equivocal reputation as a gastronome, see Jean-Léo, *Le Baron Brisse, un gastronome du Second Empire*. Bruxelles: Le Grenier du Collectionneur, 1992.

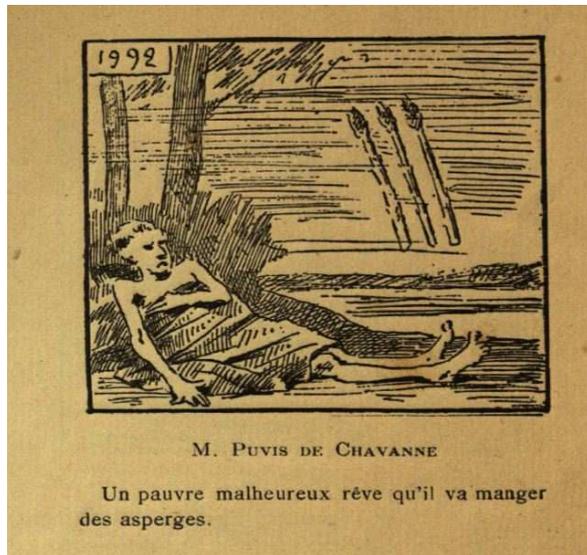
¹² The medical historian Marcel Sendrail suggested that the notion of 'style' – that traditional art-historical category – invites a consideration of the historical nature of phenomena such as diseases. He claimed that illnesses 'concourent à la définition d'une culture. Chaque siècle se réclame d'un style pathologique, comme il se réclame d'un style littéraire ou décoratif ou monumental.' See Marcel Sendrail, 'Civilisations et styles pathologiques', in *Le serpent et le miroir*. Paris: Plon, 1954, p. 212-237 (quotation p. 224).

playing on the metaphorical comparisons between painting and food. Writers appropriated these words, making common their usage in order to legitimise their discourse on art. Through the medium of the press, they popularised expressions such as *jus de pruneau*, or prune juice (when referring to the dark tonality of a painting); *plat d'épinards*, or spinach (for a bad landscape); *ragoût*, or stew (signifying an affected pictoriality).¹³

A large number of caricatures are based on these phrases. The systematic use of metaphors and puns peculiar to caricature turns the medium into the most important mode of expression for culinary ugliness. I therefore place particular emphasis on this genre, with the proviso that these motifs were present throughout the art discourse of this period. The career of Bertall (1820-1882) gives us a good sample. In 1852, he called a portrait by Hébert 'au jus de pruneau', with prune juice; in 1855, *The Barley Harvest* by John Linnell was a 'plum pudding'; in 1857, the *Razzia* by Emile Loubon was transformed into *Beef and Lamb Sautéed in Cream*; in 1868, the caricaturist stopped in front of *Young Girl Cooking a pot-au-feu with Necklaces and Bracelets*; in 1869, the *Reclining Woman* by Jean-Jacques Henner turned into a 'skate in black butter'; in 1872, the *Canal Saint-Marc* by

¹³ When Denis Diderot refers to the *ragoût* of a work, it is, rather, to praise its pictoriality; he thus describes the breasts of a figure in the *Concert* by Le Prince as 'd'un ragoût infini' (*Ruines et paysages. Salon de 1767*. Paris: Hermann, 1995, p. 318). 'Ragoût' is still a synonym of pictoriality in the *Salon of 1859* by Charles Baudelaire, who enumerated, but not without disdain, 'l'art des sauces, des patines, des glacis, des frottis, des jus, des ragoûts' (*Œuvres complètes*, t.2. Paris: Gallimard, p. 613). Champfleury in turn used the word in 1863, along with many negative allusions to cuisine, only referring to a pictoriality *de chic* and old fashions: 'Un tableau a du *ragoût* quand il est peint avec des ingrédients particuliers, séché au four, surtout quand la pâte sèche sera raclée avec du verre. Quelques coups de rabot dans de vieux empâtements, des grattages avec une pierre-ponce, l'huile d'une boîte de sardines renversée à propos sur la toile, donnent à certaines peintures romantiques un ragoût particulier, dont le secret est perdu pour la génération actuelle.' ('Dictionnaire à l'usage des connaisseurs qui ne s'y connaissent pas', *L'Hôtel des commissaires-priseurs*. Paris: E. Dentu, 1864, p. 26).

Amédée Rozier became 'a mushroom omelette'; in 1874, the painting *Goodness, it's cold!* by Giuseppe de Nittis was the 'plat du jour' composed of 'three Sweet Cocottes [meaning tarts] Fricassees in the Snow'.¹⁴



4. Japhet [pseudonym of Alexandre Jazet], *Le Salon pour rire de 1883*. Paris, A l'Imprimerie Nilson et Cie, 1883:

'A poor wretch dreams he is going to eat asparagus'

This list indicates that parodic transformations of paintings into dishes constituted one of the most frequent manifestations of culinary ugliness. In other cases, it is food which bursts into painting, swallowing up the action, as in *Le Salon pour rire de 1883* by Japhet, when *Le Rêve!* by Puvis de Chavannes becomes 'A poor wretch dreams he is going to eat asparagus' (Fig. 4).¹⁵ Food is so rich that it offers a variety of themes and situations which can easily be substituted into the actual subject of the picture. A history painting commissioned by the State from Sébastien-Melchior Cornu, *Auguste presents to the deputies*

¹⁴ Bertall, 'Couleur du Salon de 1852, ou le Salon dépeint et dessiné par Bertall', *Journal pour rire*, May 1852; 'Le Salon dépeint et dessiné par Bertall', *Journal pour rire*, 25 August 1855; 'Le Salon de 1857 dépeint et dessiné par Bertall', *Journal amusant*, 15 August 1857; 'Promenade au Salon de 1869', *Journal amusant*, 22 May 1869; *Le Grelot au Salon. Le Salon de 1872, dépeint et dessiné par Bertall* (supplément du Grelot), 2^e livraison, 1872, p. 13; 'Promenade au Salon de 1874', *L'Illustration*, 23 May 1874.

¹⁵ Since 1845, an *asperge* in French refers to someone with a pale, long, skinny body (*Trésor de la langue française*).

of the provinces of Gaul, assembled in Lyon (15 BC) the constitution according to which these provinces must be directed (Salon of 1872) was translated by Cham into: 'A Roman emperor organises a gingerbread lottery in order to get on good terms with the city of Rheims [sic]'.¹⁶ Gingerbread (a speciality of Reims since the Middle Ages) was a popular cake traditionally sold at fairs, taking the form of different characters.¹⁷ The gingerbread man was a recurring motif in art criticism used to mock badly drawn figures, as in a caricature by Gill of the *Couvent sous les armes, l'Espagne en 1811* by Georges-Jean Vibert (Salon of 1868) (Fig. 5) in which the caption mimics the rhetoric of advertisement and its dietary arguments: 'There's gingerbread, and then there's *gingerbread*. Good gingerbread is signed Vibert and never hurt anybody'.



5. André Gill, *Gill-Revue. Le Salon pour rire*, n°1, 1868:

'There's gingerbread, and then there's *gingerbread*. Good gingerbread is signed Vibert and never hurt anybody'

The metamorphosis of painting into food indicates the failure of the work, but not from just any perspective. Rarely is the subject itself the provocation for such negative treatment. The only exception is the head of John the Baptist at the table of King Herod,

¹⁶ Cham, *Le Salon pour rire*, 1872. Paris: Au bureau du Charivari, 1872.

¹⁷ First introduced in France during the Middle Ages, this cake originating from the East, made of rye flour, honey, spices (cinnamon, coriander, ginger...), was at that time mainly produced in Reims, Alsace and Burgundy.

which easily lends itself to a culinary interpretation. The decapitated head on a plate is regularly caricatured as a hot dish, as in the image of Lévy's *Hérodiade* (Salon of 1872) by Cham, exclaiming: 'If I were Herodias, I would prefer that it were a calf's head' (Fig. 6).



6. Cham, 'Le Salon pour rire', *Le Charivari*, 31 May 1872:

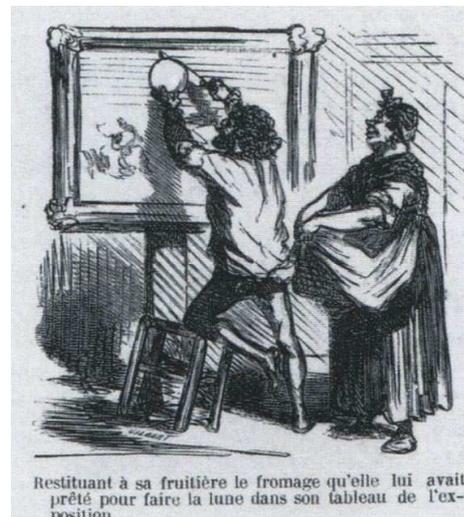
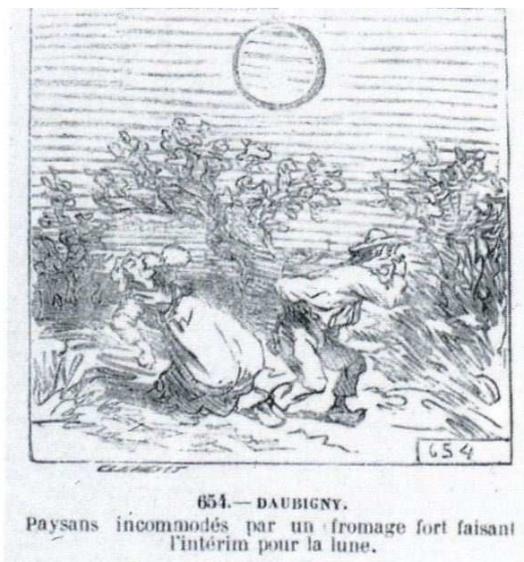
'If I were Herodias, I would prefer that it were a calf's head'

Indeed, beyond the range of works that we have considered, what condemns the transformation of painting into food is usually not subject but execution: tone, composition and design.

Disgusting Execution

Food constitutes the essential vehicle of criticism regarding formal elements. Culinary ugliness is the product of bad practices, which reduce painting to its material qualities: ridiculous forms, garish colours and disgusting stuff. Cham unites these three characteristics in two caricatures of the *Moon Rise* by Daubigny (Salon of 1868), depicting 'two peasants overcome by the stench of cheese, which is standing in for the moon' (Fig. 7), and, the following year, 'Daubigny return[ing] the cheese to the seller who lent it to him to make the moon for his painting' (Fig. 8). By metamorphosing the moon into cheese, it is implied that the pigments are runny and smelly, the colour unnatural, and the motif standardised. Nothing is said about the cheese itself being unpleasant, the painting is

damned by association. This destructive comparison implies a double assumption: of the cheese as a standardised product and of the painting as autonomous masterpiece, which neither the one nor the other is in reality. No one cheese is an exact copy of another, for its making is often the result of close individual attention, whereas many painters, like Daubigny, sold replicas and variants of successful compositions. Opposing pictorial 'creation' to cheese 'fabrication' reveals an idealistic conception of both, all the more necessary for criticism, which in itself is often a literature *à l'estomac* (with a nerve), based on easy, mercenary effects and snap judgements.



7. Cham, 'Salon de 1868', *Le Charivari*, 31 May 1868:

'Two peasants overcome by the stench of cheese, which is standing in for the moon'

8. Cham, *Le Salon de 1869 charivarisé*. Paris, A. de Vresse, 1869:

'Daubigny returns the cheese to the seller who lent it to him to make the moon for his painting.'

Colour is crucial in this type of caricature, underscored by the fact that in French, as in many other languages, a single word often signifies both colour and food: *marron*, *orange*, *jaune citron*, *rouge cerise*. In culinary metaphors, colour is represented not merely as hue,

but mainly as material.¹⁸ The transformation of paint into food reveals various fantasies about the textures of painting and what they evoke. Bertall proves himself to be a virtuoso in this type of interpretation: *Terrains d'automne* by Théodore Rousseau (Salon of 1849) changes into 'Painting in the clay oven' (Fig. 9), while *Nauffrage sur la côte du Bohuslän* by Marcus Larson (Salon of 1857)¹⁹ suggests to him a 'Lobster cooked in its juice at sunset, Swedish sauce, executed by Marcus Larson *the Ostrogoth*' (Fig. 10).



9. Bertall [pseudonym of Charles Albert d'Arnoux], 'Revue comique du Salon de peinture, de sculpture d'architecture, etc., etc., etc.', *Journal pour rire* n°78, 28 July 1849:

'Painting in the clay oven by M. Rousseau.'

10. Bertall, 'Le Salon de 1857 dépeint et dessiné par Bertall', *Journal amusant* n°81, 18 July 1857:

'Lobster cooked in its juice at sunset, Swedish sauce executed by Marcus Larson *the Ostrogoth*.'

¹⁸ On colour as food, see my contribution 'Les Couleurs de l'alimentation' in *Faim(s) de littérature. L'art de se nourrir au XIX^e siècle*, Eleonor Reverzy and Bertrand Marquer eds, proceedings of the international conference in Strasbourg University in 2011. To be published by Strasbourg University Press in 2013.

¹⁹ According to Frank Claustrat (Université de Montpellier), the so-called 'Coucher de soleil à la côte occidentale de la Suède (gouvernement de Bohus), après l'orage' (catalogue of the 1856 Salon) is in fact *Nauffrage sur la côte du Bohuslän* (1856, oil on canvas, 52 x 71.5 cm, Private Collection, Sweden).

In another work by Gill, we find a striking interpretation of the expression *tartine* (a slice of bread and butter etc.), which was used in the studio to signify a (too) large format painting. *The Prodigal Son*, a triptych by Edouard Dubufe (Salon of 1866), whose wings were in *grisaille*, becomes a monumental slice of partly covered bread: 'When M. Dubufe cuts a slice of bread, he cuts a big one. Therefore, there was not enough butter and jam to cover the whole surface' (Fig. 11).



11. Gill, 'Le Salon pour rire', *La Lune*, 13 May 1866:

'The prodigal son, or the too large *tartine* by Dubufe: When M. Dubufe cuts a slice of bread, he cuts a big one. Therefore, there was not enough butter and jam to cover the whole surface.'

Cuisine as Dishonourable Work

As an expression of work without art, culinary ugliness also functions as dishonourable work: painting without genius, it relates not to creation but to fabrication, or, more specifically, to its *recipe*. The studio is the site of these caricatures where bad painting is reduced to *cuisine*. In the 1866 satire of the blue stocking by Riou (Fig. 12), studio and kitchen are two equivalent places where the female artist spends her time: 'Madame works sometimes at the Louvre, and sometimes at home. What a funny concoction!'



12. Édouard Riou, 'Costume d'artiste', *Petit Journal pour rire*, n°492, 1865:

'Madame works sometimes at the Louvre, and sometime at home. What a funny concoction!'

More explicitly, in 1863 Gustave Courbet appears in Amédée Pastelot's 'La Photographomanie' as a 'positive' inspector (Fig. 13): working in front of a table, leaning over a plate, a glass and a bottle, he incarnates not an artist but a glutton.



13. Amédée Pastelot, 'La Photographomanie. Grande prophétie pour l'année 1900', *Journal amusant*, n°350, 13 September 1862:

'Courbet was a positive inspector.'

For Realism can be understood as a somatic activity in which the spectator faces his own physical sensations, Courbet is represented with unlimited appetite. Unable of choice and restraint, the realist body is not simply material, but aesthetic, and eventually social. It is a vulgar, popular body, dangerous because in excès.²⁰

The Bad Spectator

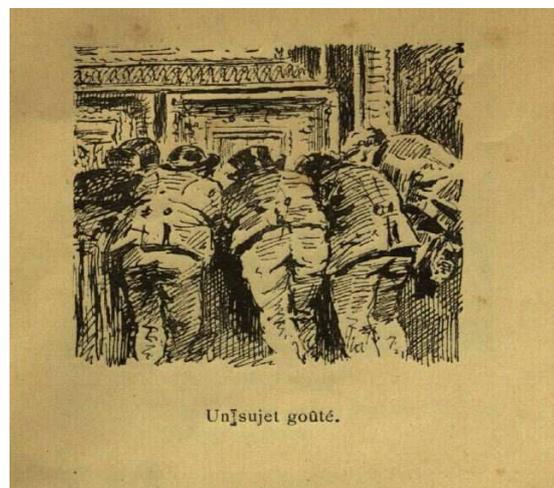
Following bad form and bad work, the third culinary *topos* is the bad spectator, which manifests itself in the condemnation of the poor, because bodily, aesthetic experience. In 1847, Cham depicts a *bourgeois* visiting the Salon and considering himself in a small picture of a melon (Fig. 14). The culinary desire of the visitor is the metaphor of an unnatural relationship to the artwork, lowered to the lowest level of consumption, where only physical satisfaction and the senses come into play.



14. Cham, 'Le Salon de 1847 illustré',
Le Charivari, 9 April 1847

²⁰ On the realist painter as huge eater and drinker, see my contribution 'Gros, gras et grossier : l'empatement de Gustave Courbet' in *Trop gros ? L'obésité et ses représentations*. Julia Csergo ed. Paris: Éditions Autrement, 2009, pp. 198-212. Close to that subject, see also 'La chair du Réalisme : le corps de Gustave Courbet' in *Courbet à neuf*, Mathilde Arnoux *et al.* eds. Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme/Musée d'Orsay, 2010, pp. 65-82.

As for the peasant woman drawn by Gédéon, trying to pick the *Raisins* by Alexis Kreyder at the 1868 Salon, she re-enacts the fable of Zeuxis to the great displeasure of the guard: 'What are you going to do?' 'Sorry, I were gonna pick a bunch o'grapes to cool us down' (Fig. 15). The taste to which Japhet alludes in 'A tasty subject' (Fig. 16) is implicitly popular, culinary and obscene: in the mass of vulgar spectators, crowding around the picture whose small format was traditionally associated with still life, we only see their bottoms.



15. Gédéon [pseudonym of Gédéon Baril], 'Au Salon', *Le Hanneton*, 28 May 1868:

'What are you going to do? Sorry, I were gonna pick a bunch o'grapes to cool us down.'

16. Japhet, *Le Salon pour rire de 1883*. Paris, A l'Imprimerie Nilson et Cie, 1883:

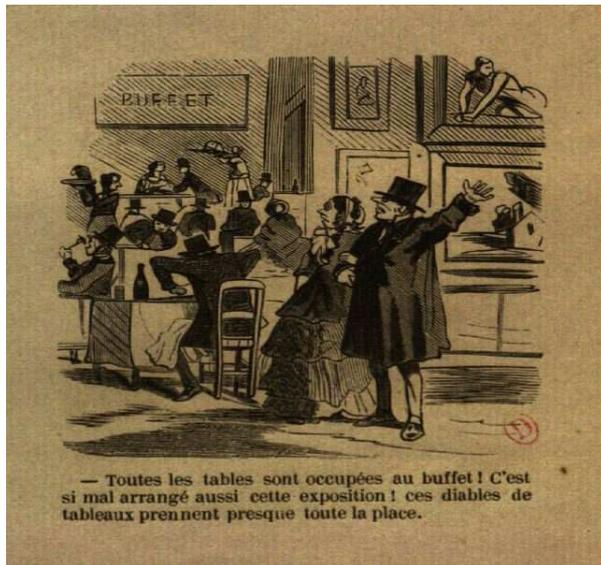
'A tasty subject.'

In these three examples, what is scorned is the way in which the non-educated public — whether peasant or *bourgeois philistin* — addresses art. They reveal a corrupted aesthetic relationship, where the spectator annihilates the object. Charles Baudelaire saw in this *consumption* the emblem of his time, and he placed it ironically at the opening of his *Salon of 1846*:

'Art is an infinitely precious good, a draught both refreshing and cheering which restores the stomach and the mind to the natural equilibrium of the ideal. You understand its function, you gentleman of the bourgeoisie — whether law-givers or shopkeepers — when the seventh or the eighth hour strikes and you bend your

tired head towards the embers of your hearth or the cushions of your armchair.'²¹

The confusion of tastes remains at the centre of the images in which Cham represents the buffet of the Salon of 1857, an emblematic setting where the unnatural rapport between art and stomach is played out (Figs. 17, 18, 19).



17. Cham, 'Promenades à l'exposition', *Le Charivari*, 4 August 1857:

'All the tables are full at the buffet. This exhibition is so badly organised. These devilish paintings take up all the space.'

18. Cham, 'Promenades à l'exposition', *Le Charivari*, 6 August 1857:

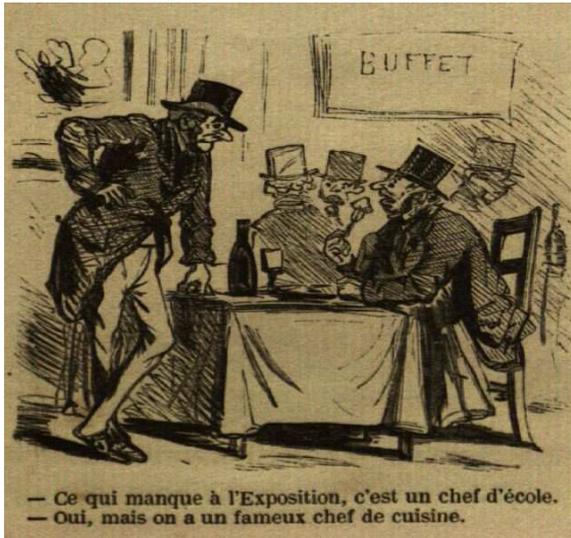
'Oh Heavens! You had the honour of your works being accepted at the exhibition. Are you a painter?'

No sir. Sculptor?'

No sir. I am a cook, I am in charge of the buffet.'



²¹ Charles Baudelaire, 'Salon de 1846', in *Œuvres complètes*, t. 2. Paris: Gallimard, 1976, pp. 415-416: 'L'art est un bien infiniment précieux, un breuvage rafraîchissant et réchauffant, qui rétablit l'estomac et l'esprit dans l'équilibre naturel de l'idéal. / Vous en concevez l'utilité, ô bourgeois, législateurs ou commerçants, quand la septième ou la huitième heure sonnée incline votre tête fatiguée vers les braises du foyer et les oreillers du fauteuil.'



19. Cham, 'Promenades à l'exposition',
Le Charivari, 6 August 1857:

'What's missing in this exhibition is a
master. Yes but we have a master chef.'

The recurring condemnation of food did not prevent the critic from adopting certain judgements about the gastronomy of his time. Since the end of the eighteenth century,²² these developments had contaminated other genres of aesthetic discourse. Art criticism echoed the contempt for sugar, which was supposed to spoil the nature of food, and which was considered a regressive taste, peculiar to women and children.²³ This criticism denounced the artificiality of colour and/or the soppieness of inspiration. In 1857, Bertall mocked the figures by Bouguereau,²⁴ which 'the artist knew how to make attractive for children, by covering them with a range of colours like sugared almonds. Violet, rose, coffee, chocolate'.²⁵ Nearly thirty years later, Edmond Bazire reproached Bouguereau's

²² See Jean-Claude Bonnet, 'L'éclosion de la littérature gastronomique au dix-huitième siècle', in *Livres en bouche. Cinq siècles d'art culinaire français du quatorzième siècle au dix-huitième siècle*, exh. cat. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, 2001, p. 223-230; Pascal Ory, *Le Discours gastronomique français des origines à nos jours*. Paris: Gallimard, 1998.

²³ On the taste for sugar and its association with femininity and childhood, see Rolande Bonnain, 'La femme, l'amour et le sucre', *Papilles* n.8, April 1995, p. 18 sq.

²⁴ William Bouguereau exhibited in 1857 *Les Quatre heures du jour (plafond)*. Location unknown.

²⁵ Bertall, 'Le Salon de 1857 dépeint et dessiné par Bertall', *Journal amusant* n.85, 15 August 1857.

'goddesses in whipped cream'.²⁶ Later still, the Nabis painter, Emile Bernard, accused Impressionism in general, and Monet in particular, of being a 'confiseur' (*confectioner*) of landscapes.²⁷

Like cheese, some meals are more dubious than others: sauces, suspected of masking the appearance and taste of food, as well as stews or omelettes, whose ingredients blend together indistinctly.²⁸ These are 'opaque' preparations, whose condemnation echoes the classical requirement for clarity and legibility in art. Diderot's positive image of the *ragoût* has no equivalent in nineteenth century art literature, where comparison of painting to food is never a compliment.²⁹

The Decay of Art

The disparaging of the painter's *cuisine* is analogous to negative discourse attending materialism, which can be found throughout the discourse on painting in the nineteenth century. Like filth or excrement, food is, above all, a substance that lowers painting to the level of a contemptible material. The culinary representations of painting contain the seeds of decay: ingestion leads naturally to defecation, orality to anality. This shift underscores the satire of the animal painter in his studio (Fig. 20), where impasto and manure are implicitly related, as the artist states: 'I'm a painter of animals and I'm not afraid of getting my hands in there.'

²⁶ Edmond Bazire, *Manet*. Paris: A. Quantin, 1884, p. 100.

²⁷ Emile Bernard, letter to Emile Schuffenecker, 17 December 1920, Bnf, Mss, Naf 14277, f°75.

²⁸ Once again, Denis Diderot was a precursor in this domain: in 1767 he compared to an *omelette* the *Essaim d'amours* by Jean-Honoré Fragonard (Musée du Louvre). See Denis Diderot, *Salons III. Ruines et paysages. Salon de 1767*. Paris: Hermann, 1995, p. 419.

²⁹ See *infra* n.12.



Édouard Riou, 'Costumes d'artistes',
Petit Journal pour rire, n°492, 1865:

'I am a painter of animals and I am not
afraid of getting my hands in there.'

Culinary metaphors certainly do not exhaust all the vocabulary of ugliness in painting of this period. But judging by the frequency and variety of its manifestations, the motif of culinary ugliness became almost an obsession in the second half of the nineteenth century. As it developed further in painting, the motif resonated with specific traits in this field. It took on a particular significance at a time when pigment and oil ground, applied to canvas, was the dominant medium. This technique incarnated the *ethos* of western art, producing not only uses and habits, but also 'material imagination', a fantasy of materials and forms. And this medium possesses a quality that affects its representation: it does not dry, but polymerises, or is transformed through a series of organic chemical reactions, which leads one to say that oil painting resists the passage of time because it stays 'alive'. This fantasy of immortality of course has a downside: oil painting always runs the risk of rotting. Rot is the dark side of polymerisation; food is its allegory. Thus the

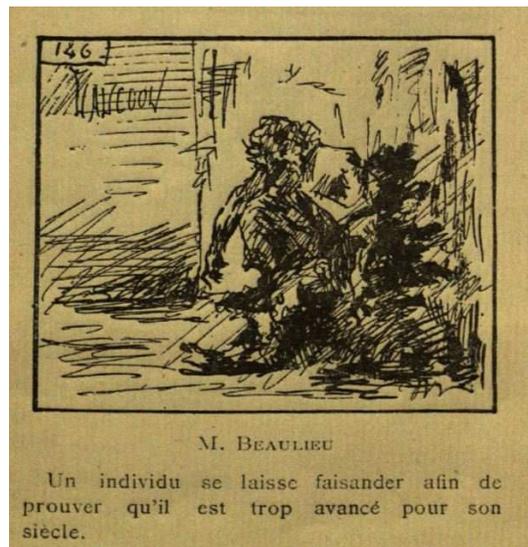
rotten Fig. 21),³⁰ the gamey (Fig. 22)³¹ and the excremental (Figs. 23, 24)³² haunt the representations of bad painting.



21. Bertall, 'Promenade au Salon', *Journal amusant*, 16 May 1868:

'Still Life, by Villain. Portraits of expired onions... it's depressing.'

22. Japhet, *Le Salon pour rire de 1883*. Paris, À l'Imprimerie Nilson et Cie, 1883: 'M. Beaulieu. A gamey fellow gets high to prove that he is too ripe for his times.'



³⁰ In the catalogue of the 1868 Salon, the only work by Eugène Villain (1821-1897) was *Derniers moments*, a genre scene, but he was better known as a still life painter.

³¹ A caricature of *L'Alcool* by Anatole-Henry de Beaulieu.

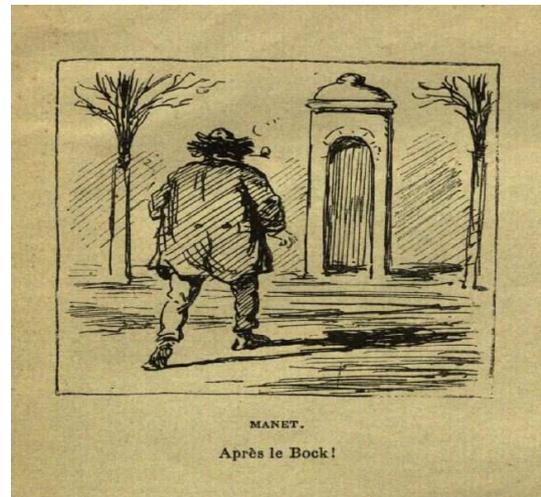
³² Cham, *Salon de 1857 illustré*. Paris: Librairie Nouvelle/Bureau du Charivari, 1857 (after Gustave Courbet, *Demoiselles des bords de la Seine*, 1857. Paris, Musée du Petit-Palais); *Le Salon pour rire*, 1874, 2^e éd. Paris: Au bureau du Charivari, 1874 (*Le Bon Bock* by Edouard Manet had been a great success at the 1873 Salon).



23. Cham, 'Promenade à l'exposition', *Le Charivari*, 8 July 1857:

'Society women with a sudden attack of the colic in the country (by M. Courbet). The painter wanted to prove that he could portrait the well-bred lady as well as the common woman.'

Cham, *Le Salon pour rire*, 1874, 2^e éd.
Paris, Au bureau du Charivari, 1874:
'Manet. After the Bock [pint]!



From the 1860s to the 1880s, culinary ugliness was the primary expression of the death of painting, a leitmotif in the criticism of avant-garde of the nineteenth century to rival those of illness (Romanticism) and dirt (Realism). This anxiety reached its heights in certain reactions triggered by modern art: when Paul de Saint-Victor wrote 'the crowd presses up to the putrefied *Olympia* as if it were at the morgue',³³ or when Albert Wolff described the *Female Torso* by Renoir displayed at the first Impressionist exhibition of 1874

³³ Paul de Saint-Victor, 'Le Salon de 1865', *La Presse*, 28 May 1865.

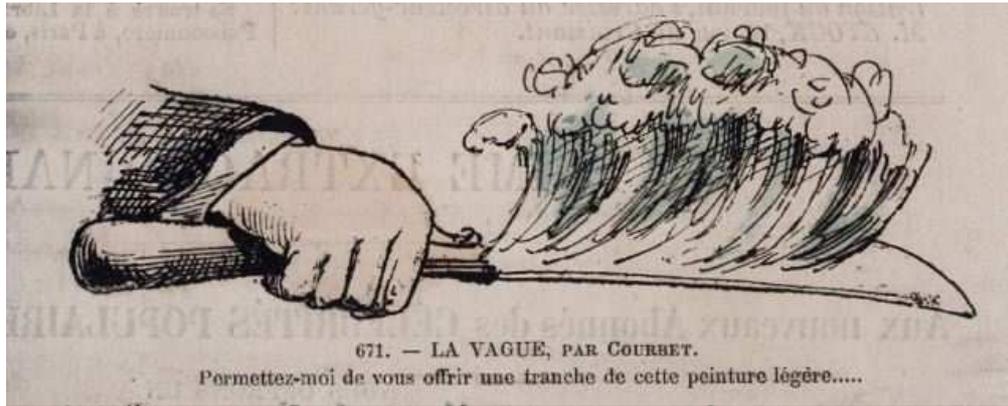
as a 'mass of decomposing flesh'.³⁴ Such commentaries were long considered as specific to the reception of modern art when, in fact, their rhetoric was inscribed in the history of the period as a whole. They indeed participate to the same distrust of the material and the perishable that informs the more-natured culinary metaphors. Culinary ugliness, as such, is the expression of the disgust and fear not only of the materiality of painting, but of those who faced it.

Ambivalence

Throughout this essay, I have focused on the negative aspects of culinary ugliness. Yet, there is also an undeniable pleasure in tasting food. To what extent are these works ambivalent, and how might they evoke a paradoxical form of pleasure? A case in point is an especially revealing caricature of *La Vague* by Courbet (Fig. 25). This picture, exhibited at the height of the painter's fame in 1870, was one of the many landscapes painted for connoisseurs who delighted in his rich impasto, an effect that he created by using the palette knife. Stock transforms the landscape into a creamy piece of cake standing on a blade, evoking both the instrument of the painter and the instrument of the gourmet. Perhaps unconsciously, Stock monumentalises *La Vague* and promotes the hand of the artist, the only protagonist in the scene. If the caption 'May I offer you a slice of this light painting?' is meant to be ironic (it must have been considered so by the contemporaries of a painter renowned for the heaviness of his painting),³⁵ the caricature, nonetheless, makes the amateur's mouth water.

³⁴ Albert Wolff, 'Le calendrier parisien', *Le Figaro*, 3 April 1876.

³⁵ See Frédérique Desbuissons, 'Courbet's Materialism', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol.32, n.2, July 2008, p. 251-260.



25. Stock, *Stock-Album* n°4, June 1870:

'The Wave, by Courbet. May I offer you a slice of this light painting?...'

The multiplicity of culinary motifs in art literature is contemporaneous with the development of 'rules of the stomach', or *gastronomie*, in France, which sets the notion of 'eating well' against more traditional conceptions of taste.³⁶ In this light, culinary ugliness may be understood as a manifestation of collective, conflicting representations about values of *cuisine* and its recognition as an essential cultural practice. From the First Empire, books such as the *Code gourmand* by Romieu and Raison endeavoured to inculcate in their contemporaries the table manners and principles which were 'the complement of any liberal education'.³⁷ The second half of the century witnessed a major increase in learned and *boulevardières* publications concerning gastronomy, which strengthened ties between artists, writers and gastronomes. Fine arts and literature were not protected from culinary intrusions; they were open fields, subject to new influences. More than anyone, Bertall

³⁶ See in particular Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, 'A Cultural Field in the Making: Gastronomy in Nineteenth-Century France', in Laurence R. Schehr and Allen S. Weiss eds., *French Food on the table, on the page, and in French Culture*. New York/London: Routledge, 2001, pp. 5-50.

³⁷ Horace-Napoléon Raison and Auguste Romieu, *Code gourmand, manuel complet de gastronomie, contenant les lois, règles, applications et exemples de l'art de bien vivre*. Paris: Ambroise Dupont et Cie, 1827, p. v: 'Au milieu des bouleversements successifs de la civilisation, une puissance a grandi, qui domine toutes les autres. Amie des aristocraties, alliée des républiques, soutien des États constitutionnels, la Gastronomie est la reine du monde!'

developed a wide range of culinary motifs in his caricatures; he also illustrated Brillat-Savarin's *Physiologie du goût* (Fig. 26)³⁸ and Eugène Briffault's *Paris à table*;³⁹ Gill, like Baron Brisse to whom Cham paid homage in 1876, was among the regular customers at the pension Laveur, along with Courbet, Etienne Carjat, Jules Vallès and Léon Gambetta.⁴⁰ Gastronomy, which had established cuisine as an art, was democratised in the form of 'cuisine bourgeoise', and extended its hegemony under the label of 'cuisine internationale'. Some artists and writers claimed popular forms of food and gave them an artistic status. The Realists who drank beer and ate *sauerkraut* at the brasserie Andler elevated the *Soupe au fromage* (cheese soup) to an avant-garde song.⁴¹ Twenty years later, Manet transmuted in his 1872 Salon success *Le Bon Bock* the portrait of a barfly in the very sign of Modernism and of its alternative culture.⁴²

³⁸ The first time in 1848 for the G. de Gonet edition, the second in 1851 for a less expensive edition by G. Barba. Both are available on Gallica, the digital library of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

³⁹ Eugène Briffault, *Paris à table* (1846), reprint Genève/Paris: Slatkine, 1980.

⁴⁰ Jean-Léo, *Le Baron Brisse, un gastronome du Second Empire*. Brussels: Le Grenier du Collectionneur, 1992, pp. 52-53.

⁴¹ *La Soupe au fromage* was originally a poem by the Realist writer Max Buchon, a Fourierist close to Victor Considérant, who lived in exile in Switzerland from 2 December 1851. His Parisian friends turned it into the 'hymne du Réalisme'. The poem is reproduced in Max Buchon, *Poésies franco-comtoises, tableaux domestiques et champêtres*. Salins/Besançon: Duvernois et Billet/Bulle et Gérard, 1862, pp. 29-30.

⁴² F. Desbuissons, 'A l'enseigne du Bon Bock', *48/14, la revue du musée d'Orsay* n.30, 2010/1, pp. 34-44.



26. Bertall, in Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *La Physiologie du goût, ou méditations de gastronomie transcendante. Ouvrage théorique, historique et à l'ordre du jour, dédié aux gastronomes parisiens* (1826). Paris, Gabriel de Gonet, 1848.

In Conclusion

In the second half of the nineteenth century, culinary ugliness was the most significant, though not the only means to expressed what in the artwork is 'absolute difference' (according to Hegel's formula): the failure of beauty, or the negativity of painting. Art criticism, and in particular caricature, whose principal focus is ugliness, gave food a demonstrative function by turning it into a metaphor of medium without art,

ignoble craft and corruption of the aesthetic relation. The very essence of painting, which ought to preserve its models from death and oblivion, appears to be attacked in ultimate representations borrowing from the traditional *vanitas* its rhetoric of the rotten.

The choice of expressing the decay of painting through food should not only be explained by the return of a repressed proximity. The importance of negative representations of cuisine coincides with the development of gastronomy as the art of cooking, of appreciating it and speaking of it. Valuing the table as a ground for exercising taste and refinement posed a threat to previous representations of culture, especially in the fine arts. The art of painting, whose elevation had been the result of a long and hard process, was emulated by a new venue whose materiality was difficult to ignore. But those who wanted to redefine art in corporeal and sensory terms – modern artists – could be tempted by the subversive potential of *l'art de la table*. In so doing, they of course opened themselves to censure as ridiculous, if not *dégoûtant*.

Food, therefore, did not only contribute to representations of the ugliness of bad, repulsive painting, it also took on an ontology of painting – both as a medium and as a social function – but predominantly in the negative: what painting *must not be*. In this way, the *topos* of culinary ugliness belongs to a history of bad taste, much of which still remains to be written, above all in art history.

(Translated from the French by Edward Payne)

Frédérique Desbuissons, scientific advisor at the Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA), Paris / senior lecturer in Art History, Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne :

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