

New Home for Dahesh Museum

by Gail Leggio

New York City's Dahesh Museum of Art—the only institution in the United States devoted to collecting, exhibiting and interpreting nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century academic art—is spreading its wings. A surprising number of people gravitated to the museum's original 1,800-square-foot exhibition space in a Fifth Avenue office building, where twenty-three savvy, illuminating shows were mounted over eight years. But in its new home, an inventive three-level renovation of the former IBM Gallery at Madison and 57th Street, the Dahesh seems poised to become a major player at a moment when, according to Director Peter Trippi, "people are ready to reassess academic art."

Both scholars and the general public will find the new Dahesh an invigorating aesthetic experience. Architect Hugh Hardy of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer came up with a strategy that acknowledges the multiple needs of museums today. At street level an inviting shop gives passersby a feel for the kind of art displayed, with posters, decorative objects and what promises to be the city's best stock of scholarly books in the field. Inside, a two-story illuminated wall that subtly alludes to Victorian motifs leads to the galleries below, which are sumptuous, serene and beautifully installed.

The Permanent Collection galleries—1,403 square feet, with walls covered in Fortuny fabric—present a selection from the Dahesh's 3,000 works. This inaugural hanging, "Reframing Academic Art: Masterworks of the Dahesh Museum of Art" (through February 8, 2004), features sixty works in a variety of popular nineteenth-century genres, including the nude, Orientalism and historical recreations. In the last category Edwin Longsdon Long's *Love's Labor Lost* (1885) is a standout, not for the rather conventional prettiness of the figures but for the stunning evocation of an ancient Egyptian interior. The pre-eminent archeological specialist, Lawrence Alma-Tadama, is represented by *Joseph, Overseer of Pharaoh's Granaries* (1874), a tour de force in which hieratic figures are posed in front of a wall decorated with a lotus frieze and a mural of workers around a boat.

Gérôme's *Michelangelo Showing a Pupil the Belvedere Torso* (1849) is a strong example of another nineteenth-century genre, the portrait of the artist as historical hero. Seen in eagle-eyed profile, the great Renaissance artist seems a demiurge next to the slight form of the apprentice; yet Michelangelo himself is dwarfed by the antique fragment. There are a number of spontaneous oil sketches that dramatize an important point about the complex web of relationships among academic and avant-garde artists, who often studied and worked together in ways not acknowledged by dichotomy-minded art historians. Two tiny works by Lord Leighton are knockouts, complex subjects dashed off in



Guillaume Bodinier, *The Marriage Proposal, Costumes of Albano, Near Rome*, 1825
 ANGERS, MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS

freely brushed daubs of paint: *Captive Andromeda* (c. 1886) and *Syracusan Bride* (c. 1865). *Study for Dante and Beatrice* (c. 1914–17) by the last-generation Pre-Raphaelite J.W. Waterhouse, the subject of Trippi's prize-winning monograph, demonstrates how literary subject matter and modernist brushwork could fruitfully co-exist. Barye, Bouguereau, Cabanel and Delaroche are among the other artists in the museum's holdings, built around the core collection of Dr. Dahesh (Salim Moussa Achi), whose friends brought the artworks from Lebanon to the United States and founded the museum in his honor.

With more space and more ambitious educational programs, the Dahesh plans on broadening its scope, acknowledging culturally significant phenomena such as world's fairs, photography, the travel industry and early filmmaking during the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. At the heart of the museum's mission, however, is the recognition of the crucial importance of academies in molding many kinds of artists. This theme is clear in the show that inaugurated the Dahesh's 3,987-square-foot Special Exhibition galleries, "French Artists in Rome: Ingres to Degas, 1803–1873."

The Dahesh was the sole North American venue for this 130-work exhibition, organized by the French Academy in Rome to commemorate its bicentennial at the Villa Medici. Young French artists could become *pensionnaires* at the Academy by winning a Prix de Rome, usually by executing a multi-figure classical painting to the judges' satisfaction. The tableau that earned the 21-year-old Ingres his five-year sojourn (1805–10) was *The Ambassadors of*

Agamemnon in the Tent of Achilles (1801), assured but conventional. In another league altogether, Ingres's 1807–09 portrait *François-Marius Granet* depicts his dashing friend with his sketchbook in his hand, the Quirinal Palace under a stormy sky in the background. Ingres's masterpiece fuses classical clarity with Romantic swagger. There were half a dozen pictures by Ingres, who returned to the Villa Medici as director from 1835 to 1840.

Granet never won the Prix de Rome but lived in Rome from 1802 to 1824. His reputation has been steadily rising in the last few decades. Two views of Roman ruins demonstrated the freshness of his vision, the tiny *At the Colosseum, a Painter at Work* (n.d.) and the large-scale *View of the Interior of the Colosseum* (1804), both dramatic, arch-shaped vistas from the shadows. Corot—along with others such as Moreau and Degas—traveled at his own expense to immerse himself in the city's rich layers of history and extraordinary light. Corot's *Rome: View from the Windows of the Artist* (1825) is an enchanting sliver of a painting. Cogniet's *The Artist in His Room at the Villa Medici* (1818) illustrates the student's life, depicting the painter reading a letter from home, a shorthand Italian landscape framed by his window. Some visiting artists focused on the indigenous culture. Guillaume Bodinier's *The Marriage Proposal, Costumes of Albano, Near Rome* (1825) hovers between the ethnographic and the picturesque. A few other works deserve mention in this brief overview. Hippolyte Flandrin's elegant nude *Figure Study: Polites, Son of Priam, Observing the Movements of the Greeks toward Troy* (1834) has a Romantic intensity that is somehow integrated into the classical severity of the overall composition (see p. 3). Jules-Élie Delauney's *The Plague in Rome* (1869) is a highly theatrical take on an incident from the life of Saint Sebastian. The city—the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius and the staircase of Santa Maria in Aracoeli are clearly visible—becomes a stage set, with a red-robed, rhetorically gesturing angel as star actor.

The next exhibition scheduled, "Charles Bague: The Art of Drawing" (November 25, 2003–February 8, 2004), presents the 200 lithographs that made up an influential *Cours de Dessin* followed by van Gogh and Picasso, as well as generations of academic painters. In the spring "La Scala: Opera and the Orient" (March 2–May 30, 2004) explores the impact of opera productions on Europe's vision of the East.

The new Dahesh facilities include a 200-seat auditorium, an education studio, a striking second-floor café with a panoramic view and private dining room, in addition to a lively program of lectures and events. New York City has long been well served by museums that document the orthodox Impressionist-to-modern trajectory favored by art historians. The Dahesh reminds us that the nineteenth century was a more polymorphous artistic milieu than we had thought; it also opens our eyes to the lessons academies still have to teach us as we enter the twenty-first century. DAHESH MUSEUM OF ART, 580 Madison Avenue, NY, NY 10022. Telephone (212) 759-0606. On the Web at www.daheshmuseum.org.