Two Male Studies by Jacques-Augustin-Catherine Pajou for the 1785 and 1787 Concours du Torse at the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture

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The neoclassical painter Jacques-Augustin-Catherine Pajou (1766–1828) has for a long time stood in the shadow of his father, the celebrated royal sculptor Augustin Pajou (1730–1809). Pajou fils became a student at the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in 1784, aiming to become a history painter. The two male studies considered here were entered in one of the competitions arranged by the Academy, the Concours d’une demi-figure peinte d’après nature (also referred to as the Concours du torse peinte (Painted Torso Competition), or simply the Concours du torse).

For several years Pajou competed for the Academy’s prestigious Prix de Rome, a studentship at the École Française in Rome which had become almost a prerequisite if you were to have a chance of carving yourself a place as a history painter in France at that time.1 Antiquity and the work of old masters were emphasised in the teaching of the Academy, and the preliminary competitions associated with the Prix de Rome demonstrate the importance that was attached to technical skill in the tradition of these artistic models. Technical specialisation was not only an advantage in the repertoire of the artist’s skills, but something that was actively pursued. Just like the older Concours de tête d’expression (Expressive Head Competition), the Concours du torse was one of these preliminary competitions. The former was founded in 1759 by the connoisseur and collector Comte de Caylus (1692–1765),
and the latter in 1784 by the prominent pastellist and portrait painter Maurice Quentin de La Tour (1704–1788), who at the time held the titles “Peintre ordinaire du Roy et Conseiller de l’Académie”. Thus, both competitions were initiated by men who, in different capacities, were central in the development of French art in the middle of the 18th century, perhaps especially concerning technique. The competitions were directly associated with their founders, even to the extent that they were also referred to as the *Prix de M. le Comte de Caylus* and the *Prix de M. De la Tour*, and in some respects the latter competition was created in response, even as an alternative, to the former. Ironically perhaps, La Tour was of course particularly famous for his expressive head studies and portraits, and the purpose of his competition was revealingly described in its rules: “On choisira, autant qu’il sera possible, un modèle dont la tête ait du caractère et soit en quelque manière propre à entrer dans un tableau d’histoire”. The character and mien of the head and face were thus as important as the rendering of the actual torso. In addition, the description “propre à entrer dans un tableau d’histoire” of course reveals the emphasis put on the skills required in history painting and how this could help the Academy to ascertain the appropriateness of also awarding the winner of the competition the *Prix de Rome* at a later stage. The minutes of the Academy show what care went into the design of the competition and, in general, the rules were quite detailed. It was, for example, also decided that participants had only one week to complete their work, and that if you had previously won one of the *Grands Prix* or a *première médaille*, you were not eligible to take part in this new competition, since it was taken for granted that you would in that case already possess greater skills than those who had not yet received such honours.

Case studies of La Tour’s competition are quite interesting and can potentially offer us clues to, and in some instances
clear evidence of, the aesthetic policies of the Academy and how they helped to shape artistic taste in France at the time. Reviewing the competition in the years that Pajou participated is to some extent like looking through a who’s who of the generation of neoclassical artists who would come to dominate French art in the late 18th and early 19th centuries – among other competitors, we find for example Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson (1767–1824), Guillaume Guillon-Lethière (1760–1832) and François-Xavier Fabre (1766–1837). The first of the two male studies considered here was entered in the second year of La Tour’s competition, which was of course also Pajou’s second year at the Academy (Fig. 1). Two years later Pajou entered the competition anew and this time won a special prize, a “médaille d’encouragement” (Fig. 2). The two works produced two years apart are quite similar and reflect the consistency of the competition, which was undoubtedly a result of the detailed regulations. As we can see, even the model used for the paintings was the same during these years. In a grand, almost baroque style, suited to the competition’s purpose as a preparation for history painting, Pajou expertly depicts the young man dramatically draped in red and leaning on a rock. His handling of light and colour brings to mind the work of earlier chiaroscuro masters such as the Caravaggisti, and in the sculptural way he renders the form of the male body one can perhaps detect the influence of his father. The poses of the model in the two paintings are different, but the basic components are the same. The goal of ascertaining the artist’s ability to capture the facial expression in relation to both the torso and details such as the hands is obvious. In fact, in the competition rules it was stated that both hands of the model were to be depicted in the composition. Similarly, there was an express directive concerning the use of light and shadow.

For both the 1785 and the 1787 competition, the entries of the winners, Guillaume Guillon-Lethière (Fig. 3) and François-Xavier Fabre (Fig. 4), are preserved in the collections of the École des Beaux-Arts. This enables us to make some interesting comparisons in general between the works of the two years, as well as to more closely determine the particular qualities of Pajou’s competing works. The specific pose of the model in 1787 allowed the participating artists more scope than in 1785 to demonstrate their skill in rendering, for example, the details of the hands and the ripple of musculature of the arms. In the 1787 paintings there is also more of an effort to fill the background with depth than before, although this is much more pronounced in Pajou’s work than in Fabre’s. Pajou puts great emphasis on the contrast between the white of the model’s skin and the deep black shadows of the background. In comparison, his works seem to have a bolder quality than both Guillon-Lethière’s and Fabre’s, especially considering the latter two artists’ careful classicist rendering of the model’s form and the more cautious contrast between figure and background which they achieve. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the Academy members preferred the more academic work of Guillon-Lethière and Fabre, which must be considered more in line with the neoclassical taste of the time.

However, given that the Academy awarded Pajou a special prize in 1787, its members obviously could not deny the strength and immediacy of his work, qualities most clearly evident in his rendering of the expression of the model’s face, which is much more detailed and vibrant than in Fabre’s work. In this, Pajou’s work seems closer in spirit, not only to that of old masters of the preceding century, but also, pointing forward, to the works of artists such as Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), as Alice Thomine-Berrada has pointed out.
ACQUISITIONS/TWO MALE STUDIES BY JACQUES-AUGUSTIN-CATHERINE PAJOU

It is almost as if Pajou, beforehand and in anticipation, is trying to capture the spirit of the art that he would have been studying had he won the Prix de Rome. Perhaps it is significant here how the Academy, stating the purpose of the special prize, described it as one awarded for the artist’s dessin, in this case referring to the underdrawing of his work, which could possibly also be viewed as stressing to an even greater extent the importance of the technical skill demanded of these would-be history painters.\textsuperscript{13}

Apart from the quality of his work, the award of the special prize may also reflect an ambivalent relationship between the Academy and Pajou and, perhaps to some extent, be indicative of what path his future career would take. One can only speculate on whether the Academy’s initial reluctance to award Pajou the Prix de M. De la Tour, despite the high quality of his entries in the competitions of both 1785 and 1787, had something to do with his father being a member of the Academy at the time. While common in the private artists’ studios of the time, this familial relationship within a formal institution was quite unusual. It must, in some instances at least, have created problems, the Academy perhaps not wishing, for example, to be accused of any overt nepotism that could possibly be exposed through the competitions. In this respect, it is significant that, while Pajou did go on to win the Prix de M. De la Tour a few years later, he still failed to secure the Prix de Rome.\textsuperscript{14}

The stature of the work of Pajou’s father meant that his son was always referred to as Pajou fils, a name that even he himself used when he signed his works, including the two competition entries. Here then, the fact that his father was such a central figure in the arts of France at the time could perhaps be viewed as something of a hindrance to the advancement of Pajou fils’s career as a history painter. This, together with the artist’s renowned antagonistic disposition, described by Girodet amongst others, was perhaps part of the reason why Pajou’s relationship to the Academy turned sour and he later became a revolutionary, joining what was known as the Compagnie des arts.\textsuperscript{15}

Although Pajou did go on to produce history paintings, he never became prominent in that field in the same way as Girodet or Fabre, for instance. Instead, he primarily made his mark as a portrait painter. His proper place in French neoclassicist art has been continuously rehabilitated over the last 25 years, for example through the publication of a catalogue raisonné of his work in 1997 and the Louvre’s acquisition in 2014 of a great example of Pajou’s portraiture, Portrait of the Artist’s Family from 1802.\textsuperscript{16} Through the identification and contextualisation of the two male studies purchased by the Nationalmuseum as entries in the art-historically important Concours du torse, Jacques-Augustin- Catherine Pajou’s place and position in late 18th-century French painting, regardless of his familial status as fils in the shadow of the great royal sculptor, are further affirmed.

Notes:
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
12. I especially wish to thank Alice Thomine-Berrada at the École des Beaux-Arts for providing information about the Concours du torse and the works of Guillaume Guillon-Lethière and François-Xavier Fabre which won the competition in 1786 and 1787.
13. This “medal of encouragement” was also referred to as une première Médaille de dessin. Procès-verbaux de l’Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, 1780–1788, pp. 329–330.