Les Misérables in Two Genre Paintings
by Jean-Claude Bonnefond

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Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1654), Saint Catherine of Alexandria, c. 1627–30(?). Oil on canvas, 90 × 75.4 cm. Purchased with funds from a donor who wishes to remain anonymous 2019. Nationalmuseum, NM 7538

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The early part of the 19th century, and especially the years after the Bourbon Restoration in 1815, saw a rise in genre painting in France. Anecdotal scenes from French history and literature expressed a new national self-confidence. “Historical genre”, with thought-provoking or amusing episodes rather than fateful, dramatic events, gradually became an established subdivision of history painting, but genre scenes in more or less contemporary settings also rapidly gained ground. Inspired by Dutch 17th-century masters such as Gerrit Dou (1613–1675), artists painted in precise detail and with smooth handling on fairly small canvases. The public were enthusiastic, but critics viewed the trend with concern. Would it lead to a marginalisation of history painting, with its lofty aims and focus on decisive and dramatic situations? Was this pedantic way of painting not a blind alley?

One centre for anecdotal painting was Lyon, where a leading figure of medieval-inspired “troubadour painting”, Pierre Révoil (1776–1842), was a professor at the city’s art school. The critics spoke disparagingly of an “École de Lyon”, marked by an excessively finicky and detailed manner, and, by extension, of this art as a manifestation of provincial narrowness.²

Fig. 1 Jean-Claude Bonnefond (1796–1860), The Little Savoyards’ Bedroom, signed 1817. Oil on canvas, 89 × 66 cm. Purchase: Hedda and N.D. Qvist Fund 2020. Nationalmuseum, NM 7567.
Artists from Lyon, however, enjoyed success at the Paris Salons. One of them was Jean-Claude Bonnefond (1796–1860), a pupil of Révoil’s, who made his debut at the age of 21 with *La Chambre à coucher des petits Savoyards* (The Little Savoyards’ Bedroom) at the Salon of 1817. The painting of the two young Savoyard boys in their makeshift sleeping quarters was purchased by the Duke of Berry, nephew of King Louis XVIII. When Bonnefond exhibited another two genre paintings the following year, *Le Marchand de volaille* (The Poultry Dealer) and *Un Vieillard aveugle guidé par sa petite fille* (A Blind Old Man is Led by his Daughter (or Granddaughter)), the duke bought them as well. In fact, his wife Marie-Caroline was probably behind the acquisitions, as these genre scenes are to be found in the catalogue of her painting collection, published in 1822 with the title *Galerie de son Altesse Royale Madame la duchesse de Berry*, with entries by Féréol Bonnemaison and lithographs of the works included. In the dedication, framed as a foreword, it is stated that the duchess’s aim in publishing the catalogue was, in particular, to make the “significant achievements” of contemporary genre painters more widely known through the lithographic reproductions.

Bonnefond’s three early works had long been considered lost, but two of them were recently acquired by the Nationalmuseum. They both portray poor itinerant entertainers, who played music or performed tricks on the streets for money. In one of them, Bonnefond’s painting from his debut at the 1817 Salon, we see two young Savoyards with their trained marmots in the squalid space in which they have spent the night (fig. 1). A few objects on the unswept floor convey a picture of the boys’ existence: a faience plate, a bowl and spoon – perhaps with a helping of soup from the larger pot next to it – and a plank with a couple of puppets. Standing in the window recess are a bucket and broom, hanging on the wall a hurdy-gurdy. The hurdy-gurdy, marmots and puppets all featured in the performances by which itinerant inhabitants of the poor mountain areas of Savoy sought to make a living during the winter months.

Seasonal migration from Savoy to the towns of Europe had been going on since at least the Middle Ages and was viewed in the 19th century as a growing social problem. Young Savoyards were forced to carry out dangerous work in the big cities, including as chimney sweeps, and lived in groups controlled by often unscrupulous middlemen. Victor Hugo highlighted their plight in his novel *Les Misérables*, published in 1862, but set in the first half of the century.

As early as the 17th century, Savoyard migrants performing on streets and in squares had become a subject of art. They first appeared in anonymous prints like *Les Cris de Paris*, in which labourers, craftsmen and vendors were portrayed in urban settings. Antoine Watteau produced a dozen or so drawings of Savoyards with musical instruments, marmots and the various peep shows that were also part of their performances (fig. 2). Watteau’s images, which appear to have been based on studies of impoverished models on the streets of Paris, had several counterparts later in the century. A fine example is Nicolas Bernard Lépicié’s (1735–1784) drawing *An Old Beggar*, dated 1777 and acquired by the Nationalmuseum in 2017 (fig. 3). In this case, the drawing is a study for a genre painting, *Old Beggar with Child*, in an American private collection.

Alongside the genre subjects, we also find portraits in the 18th century of aristocratic children and young people *en Savoyards*, dressed in more or less Savoyard costumes and accompanied by marmots and traditional musical instruments. Carl Gustaf Tessin introduced the practice in Sweden with a pastel portrait of his sister-in-law Augusta Törnflycht “en Marchande de Marmotte”, which he commissioned from Gustaf Lundberg in 1739 (fig. 4). As Lundberg and Tessin were both in Paris, while the sitter was in Sweden, Lundberg

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**Fig. 2** Antoine Watteau (1684–1721), *Young Savoyard*, 1703–08. Red chalk, a little retouch in the hair with black chalk on paper, 30.0 x 18.8 cm. Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, KKS10207.
had to work on the basis of another portrait when he depicted the countess in a yellowish-brown woollen dress trimmed with blue and red ribbon, cautiously lifting the lid of the marmot’s box which she carries on a strap over her shoulder. As Carolina Brown observes, pastoral female portraits of this type are to be understood as part of the culture of aristocratic society, in which dressing-up games, plays and verses with equivocal allusions played an important part.9

François-Hubert Drouais portrayed pairs of young aristocratic brothers en Savoyards, among them The Comte and Chevalier de Choiseul as Savoyards (fig. 5).

The disguise is thin: though the cut of the costumes has some semblance of credibility, they seem to be made of silk velvet.10 The masquerade suggests that the Choiseul brothers were particularly well behaved and pure-hearted. “The legendary devotion of the Savoyard urchins to their homeland and families made them appear as idyllic,
In his catalogue entry from 1822, Féréol Bonnefaisson does not dwell so much on the social implications of the subject, as on the painterly qualities and the credibility of the image. One can perhaps also detect a note of criticism against the 18th century’s portraits of noble children en Savoyards: “M. Bonnefond’s Savoyards are charming, unspoiled children of nature”, writes Edgar Munhall, and their supposedly submissive and loving behaviour towards their parents was contrasted with that of the spoilt and insolent children of Paris. Jean-Baptiste Greuze was captivated by the moral dimension of the subject and depicted Savoyard children repeatedly from the 1750s to the 1780s, with a particular interest in their physical privations and the psychological suffering arising from separation from their parents. Bonnefond’s young Savoyards are it seems to be understood in that tradition, as noble children of nature who, though forced into a hard life far from home, display a straightforward and innocent disposition.

Fig. 5 François-Hubert Drouais (1727–1775), The Comte and Chevalier de Choiseul as Savoyards, 1758. Oil on canvas, 139.4 × 106.7 cm. Purchased by The Frick Collection 1966. The Frick Collection, New York, NY, 1966.1.164.

Fig. 6 Auguste-Xavier LePrince (1799–1826), Comfort and Misery in Paris, c. 1820. Pencil, ink and wash on paper, 18.2 × 15.7 cm. Purchase: Wiros Fund 2018. Nationalmuseum, NMH 13/2018.
perhaps too much so, though there is no privileged class when it comes to beauty. Judging from the excessive cleanliness of the rags in which they are dressed, and from their rosy complexions, one might think that a solicitous mother had presided over their morning toilet. They are not orphans, not abandoned... They do not upset us, but please us all the more.”

A drawing by Auguste-Xavier LePrince (1799–1826) from 1820, in which two boys, shivering, are trying to sleep in the gutter, shows that contemporary artists did not duck subjects in which the misery is more striking, at least not in study drawings for which they did not need to find buyers (fig. 6).

In the other painting we see an elderly man, playing a fiddle, and a young girl (perhaps they too Savoyards), in a courtyard (fig. 7). Their clothes are threadbare and tattered; the girl, who is barefoot, holds up her apron, perhaps to catch any small change the occupants of the house throw down. As in the interior with the Savoyard boys, Bonnefond has included a still life with ceramic objects, placed on and beside the barrel to the left. Bonnemaison, though favourably disposed towards the artist, criticises the painting on several points of principle in the catalogue of the Duchess of Berry’s collection. It is not, he writes, well-executed detail that turns painting into fine art; it is not with carefully applied brushstrokes that an artist moves the beholder. Bonnefond “dwells on the details, enjoys them, returns to them incessantly, and his touch, tired by such meticulous effort, has lost its ardour by the time it gets to the essential parts of his composition”.

The worn and patched clothes of the beggars are painted with great care – even, the author adds, “with too much care” – but it is impossible to make out the movements of the bodies or the naked limbs beneath them, and unless that requirement is met good taste cannot be satisfied. A demand for correct figure drawing and emphasis on the expressiveness of the human figures are traditional arguments for the primacy of history painting. The same views are repeated concerning the third painting by Bonnefond dealt with in the catalogue, Le Marchand de volaille.

Starting as he does with individual works – with the argument, for instance, that the artist should have devoted less care to the still-life passages in order to make the paintings better works of art – Bonnemaison’s criticism offers interesting insight into Restoration France’s discussion about genre boundaries, as analysed by Stephen Bann. In the case of Bonnefond, the criticism was also part of what can be described as a press campaign to persuade
the gifted painter to abandon the detailed manner of the École de Lyon and shake off the supervision of his former teacher Révoil. The reviewer and writer Auguste Jal (1795–1873) in particular, himself a native of Lyon, was to pursue the matter in rhetorically pointed pronouncements over the next few years.15 When the city of Lyon bought Bonnefond’s prizewinning Le Mauvais propriétaire in 1824 in competition with the Musées royaux (that is, the Louvre collections) – paying 8,000 livres for it, a substantial sum for a genre painting – the artist left Lyon for Rome, where his manner of painting rapidly changed as he encountered different ideals and a new light. Jal wrote triumphantly in his review of the 1827 Salon that Bonnefond had now finally managed to rid himself of the label of a “pupil of the Lyon School”, having distanced himself from Révoil’s harmful influence. His early “polished” manner and dark palette had been very lucrative, given their appeal to “amateurs” and “the ladies”, so according to Jal his sacrifice in abandoning them to become a real artist in Rome was all the greater. But while the critics praised Bonnefond’s light, broadly painted canvases from his time in Italy, there was perhaps something in this freer existence that did not suit the artist: in 1831, he returned to Lyon to succeed Révoil as professor at the École des Beaux-Arts. He retained the post for 30 years, during which time he concentrated more on his teaching than on his art.

With its acquisition of these early works by Jean-Claude Bonnefond, the Nationalmuseum is now able to show important paintings by an artist seen in his own day as a rising star – paintings of a kind that was successful with the public and collectors, but did not meet the critics’ expectations and definitions of great art and was thus consigned to obscurity in art history.

Notes:
4. By this time, the Duke of Berry was dead, having been murdered in February 1820 by a fanatical anti-monarchist.
11. Bonnemaison 1822, vol. 1, unpaged: “Les Savoyards de M. Bonnefond sont charmants; ils le sont trop peut-être, quoiqu’il n’y ait point de classe privilégiée pour la grâce et pour la beauté. A l’excessive propreté des haillons dont ils sont couverts, à l’éclat de leur teint fleuri, on croiroit qu’une mère soigneuse a présidé à leur toilette du matin. Ils ne sont point orphelins, ils ne sont point abandonnés... ils intéressent moins, s’ils plaisent davantage” (ellipsis in the original).
12. Bonnemaison 1822, vol. 2, unpaged: “il s’arrête aux détails, il s’y plaît, il y revient sans cesse, et sa touche, fatiguée par un travail si minutieux, n’arrive que refroidie aux parties essentielles de sa composition. Certes, il serait difficile de rendre avec plus d’exactitude tous ces haillons dont le vieil aveugle est affublé; les vêtements de la petite fille ne sont pas moins étudiés; mais sous ces draperies informes, peintes avec tant de soin, avec trop de soin sans doute, on cherche en vain le mouvement du corps, le sentiment des lignes qui devraient indiquer le nu des figures, et dès-lors le goût est moins satisfait.”