


# From sacred body to waste: regimes of value associated with the corpse in French nineteenth-century painting

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## Abstract

There are many factors at work in the iconography of human remains. Some of those frequently discussed are aesthetic criteria, iconographic traditions and specific contingencies, whether political (for example in war paintings), symbolic (essential for transi images) or cultural. There is, however, one factor that is rarely mentioned, despite its centrality: the regime of value associated with corpses. Christ's body is not painted in the same way as that of a departed relative or that used in a human dissection. Artists choose a suitable iconography depending on how the remains are perceived. This criterion became absolutely crucial in contexts such as nineteenth-century France, when attitudes to corpses underwent major changes.

**Key words:** corpse, French painting, nineteenth century, regime of value, iconography

## Introduction

There are many factors at work in the iconography of human remains. Some of those frequently discussed are aesthetic criteria, iconographic traditions and political, symbolic or cultural contingencies. There is, however, one factor that is rarely mentioned, despite its centrality: the regime of value associated with corpses. In fact, the status of a dead body is determined by a cultural context and a value scale that are both variable. Christ's body is not painted in the same way as that of a departed relative or that used in a human dissection. Artists choose a suitable iconography depending on how the remains are perceived.<sup>1</sup> In last portraits,<sup>2</sup> the dead person is first and foremost the loved one, 'the person who survives'<sup>3</sup> for a little while longer, and not the sacred body of Jesus, while in dissection scenes the individual is considered as anatomical material.



The aim of this article is to explore the iconographic implications of the regime of value associated with corpses. Art historical studies of the dead body have never addressed this question directly.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it is a key criterion in contexts like nineteenth-century France, when attitudes to human remains underwent major changes.<sup>5</sup> We will limit our discussion to paintings, although photography<sup>6</sup> and sculpture<sup>7</sup> also featured their share of dead bodies at that time. There is no doubt that painting is the medium that offers the widest spectrum of attitudes to death, while also having the iconographic capability to make differences clear.

The resulting variations may not be due to the regime of value, but this approach is supported by the way works were received. Representations of advanced post-mortem changes shocked nineteenth-century audiences when featured in religious paintings but were deemed perfectly acceptable for military subjects. The same representation was met with two completely opposed reactions. Attitudes to death in the society that produced these works is, therefore, a key to understanding the iconographic choices relating to the depiction of the dead.

### The motif of the corpse in the nineteenth century

While historians have studied the evolution of attitudes to human remains over time with interest, art historians have instead focused on how representations of dead bodies relate to reality (particularly via the concept of mimesis).<sup>8</sup> This relationship to the real operates on two levels. The first is that of the evolving changes undergone by the body during death and decomposition. The second is the accuracy, or not, of the depiction of post-mortem changes at the moment selected by the artist. The condition of the cadaver will vary depending on the subject matter, from a state resembling sleep immediately after death to the total disintegration of the body.

These two levels allow us to distinguish three types of iconography: corpse, dead body and beautiful death. What we call a corpse is a body showing signs of decomposition that leave no doubt as to its condition. A dead body, meanwhile, euphemises the reality of post-mortem changes and renders them less unsettling. Beautiful death goes even further, emphasising the few characteristics of death that idealise the body while erasing all other marks.

This is a simplistic division, but one that facilitates our exploration of the motif. We will bear it in mind for the rest of the discussion. Indeed, this typology allows us to identify major trends in the history of art, from periods preferring idealised bodies to those more likely to portray them in the grip of advanced decomposition (like the transi images of the fifteenth century).

Following this logic, the second half of the eighteenth century was a time of idealisation, the conclusion of a gradual rejection of decomposition. Decorum had in fact been imposing itself since the end of the seventeenth century, making death a 'real representational challenge', in the words of Frédéric Cousinié.<sup>9</sup> Charles Alphonse Du Fresnoy encouraged artists to 'shun ... those things which are barbarous, shocking to the eye ... as also all things that are obscene, impudent, filthy, unseemly',<sup>10</sup> including human remains. As cadavers

were nevertheless indispensable to many artistic subjects, painters oriented their iconography towards 'beautiful death'. In the following century, the growing rejection of violence in the arts and the development of the theory of the *beau idéal* conflicted ever more with the iconography of decomposing corpses. A few examples of the latter were still being produced until the middle of the century, as illustrated by Dominique Lefèvre-Desforges's *Judith Cutting off the Head of Holofernes* (1761, Paris, École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts). Nevertheless, although mimesis remained one of the foundations of aesthetic theory, the classicising tendency guided the motif towards the ideal. *The Death of Marat* (1793, Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium) by Jacques-Louis David is a good illustration of this. Although the knife and the blood in the bath point to the murder that has just taken place, the politician's body looks more as though it is asleep than in the process of becoming a corpse. As Charles Baudelaire noted poetically, 'Henceforth Marat can challenge Apollo; death has kissed him with his loving lips and he is at rest in the peace of his transfiguration.'<sup>11</sup>

In the nineteenth century the paradigm changed. The iconography of human remains was marked by the reappearance of the iconography of the corpse, ending the ubiquity of beautiful death. François Xavier Fabre's portrayal of a beautiful death in *Death of Abel* (1790, Montpellier, Musée Fabre) is worlds away from Félix Vallotton's striking image of a decomposing body, *The Corpse* (1894, Grenoble, Musée des Beaux-Arts), painted at the end of the following century. The comparison is simplistic – the route from one iconography to the other was not linear – but there is no mistaking the change. It becomes even more obvious when studying works depicting the same subject.

The discovery of the body of Charles the Bold, duke of Burgundy, after the battle of Nancy in 1477 was a popular theme in the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> As described by Prosper de Barante, the scene featured a body that had been dead for several days and that was covered in wounds. Eugène Roger's *The Death of Charles the Bold* (1837, Nantes, Musée des Beaux-Arts), however, deviates widely from that macabre account.<sup>13</sup> The dead as he paints them are the beautiful dead. Admittedly their grey complexion, tending towards yellow, contrasts with that of the living; various wounds can be seen and there is even, on the duke's arms, an attempt to convey the rigidity of the flesh. Nevertheless, the bodies look more like life drawings or classical statues than decomposing corpses. The face of the body on the left, with its half-closed eyes, is a detail that undeniably shifts the iconography from beautiful death to the dead body, but it is overshadowed by the range of emotions visible in the group searching for the duke. This euphemistic approach to the reality of death earned Roger the praise of the magazine *Le Magasin Pittoresque*: 'Mr. Eugène Roger has demonstrated, in the execution of the magnificent draperies that cover his figures and in that of the corpses in the foreground of his painting, that he knows how to unite the most stringent study of the human body with the ingenious and brilliant art of representing the richest clothing.'<sup>14</sup>

Another version of the same subject was presented by Charles Houry (Nancy, Musée des Beaux-Arts) at the Salon of 1852. Houry reduced the ratio of living figures to human remains: four dead and three living in the foreground, and four

living and one dead in the background. Piled on top of each other, the dead vary in colour in different areas of the body, from dirty white to a dark grey representing necrosis of the extremities. The bodies are stiff with rigor mortis. One of them has his head turned towards the viewer, his eyes open. There is blood in several places in the painting, and wounds are deliberately highlighted. Fifteen years after Roger's work, the iconography has shifted towards the corpse.

A final French depiction of the same scene, by August Feyen Perrin (Nancy, Musée des Beaux-Arts), was exhibited and awarded a prize at the Salon of 1865. Although post-mortem changes are no longer presented in such an advanced state as in Houry's painting, the artist has nevertheless been careful to paint the dead in a distinctive greyish white that contrasts with the colouring of the living. He has also significantly increased the amount of blood, which runs from the wounds and stains the bank of the nearby stream red.

To conclude this chronological progression, we now turn to François Schommer's painting of a similar subject: *Édith Discovering the Body of King Harold after the Battle of Hastings* (1880, Nîmes, Musée des Beaux-Arts). Although the canvas is known only from a black-and-white photograph, the dead body is striking and revives the iconography of the corpse. The body is emaciated, with open eyes staring blankly and the mouth twisted in an expression of pain. In the background, birds are devouring human remains. There is a huge difference between Schommer's work and the version of the same scene painted by Horace Vernet in 1827 (Cherbourg, Thomas Henry Museum). The latter depicts a beautiful death, with the artist taking care to hide the dead man's face with a cloth.

This series illustrates the path towards a greater respect for post-mortem changes in nineteenth-century painting, even if there was no intention to represent actual decomposition. This evolution was pervasive throughout the century's artistic output. But the motif is more complex than simply its relationship to reality. Several factors counteracted this overall progression. Independent of the time period, there are internal variations that depend on the gender<sup>15</sup> and age of the dead, and above all on the subject matter of the work.

Last portraits mostly used the iconographies of beautiful death and the dead body. The iconography of the corpse is rare in such portraits, reserved for anonymous figures and so outside the logic of family commissions that characterised this type of work. Paintings of fictional subjects also mainly depict beautiful deaths, following the example of Anne Louis Girodet's *Burial of Atala* (1808, Paris, Louvre Museum). In paintings of military subjects, in contrast, the dead display the signs of post-mortem changes to a greater extent and at an earlier date. In 1808, Antoine-Jean Gros's *Napoleon on the Battlefield of Eylau* (Paris, Louvre Museum) depicted wide-eyed, bluish corpses piled up right in front of the viewer. But variations can be detected even within the same genre if we refine our analysis further. There are significant differences between corpse-strewn battlefields, close-ups of bloody skirmishes, and military scenes with no cadavers. Religious paintings display even bigger discrepancies. Most depictions of the dead in the genre use the iconography of the dead body, but the rest are split between the extremes of the corpse and beautiful death, including for identical subjects. In the case of historical paintings,

the death of historical figures was the time to portray beautiful deaths, while massacres, royal crimes or epidemics called on the iconography of the corpse. Macabre scenes (crimes, executions, scenes from a dissection or a morgue etc.) began very early on to show bodies in a state of advanced post-mortem changes, going even further than war paintings by the end of the century. Paintings of funerals are, conversely, mostly divided between beautiful death and the dead body.

Once again, we are simplifying by grouping paintings by subject, but the differences are marked. The iconography of the dead varies, depending on the subject and/or theme of works (religious, military etc.). This introduces chronological deviations into the overall evolution of the motif, and sometimes involves resistance to that evolution.

How can we explain these variations? The different regimes of value associated with cadavers are one factor. Far from the reassuring euphemism of the terms 'deceased' or 'departed', the word 'corpse' refers strictly to the material remains of a human life. And yet, although the meaning of the word seems definitive, we see it alternately as something that supported the person it was (which leads us to see in it the persistence of the individual) and as residual matter that is destined to disappear. On top of this initial ambivalence, cadavers also acquire particular statuses, such as the sacred body in the religious sphere or anatomical material in science. Moreover, the status of a given body may vary as different processes of qualification or disqualification come into play, and the parts of the body may also receive differential treatment. These varying attitudes to the body are reflected in art. Human remains are perceived in different ways depending on the subject of the work and are painted using the appropriate iconography.

### **The regimes of value associated with human remains in the nineteenth century and their aesthetic manifestations**

This matching becomes clear when we compare the subject matter of paintings and their associated regimes of value. Last portraits (painted on the deathbed) depict an individual. Historians of mentalities<sup>16</sup> and later of representations<sup>17</sup> have shown that the nineteenth century was a pivotal time of profound changes in how human remains were treated and buried, as well as of renewed questioning about the souls of the dead. One of the characteristic features of these changes was the conspicuous veneration of the dead, which was accompanied by increasing respect for remains and a fetishisation of memory. This veneration did not distinguish between the departed person and that person's physical vessel. The trend for embalming<sup>18</sup> and graveyard visits<sup>19</sup> testifies to this development. The cadaver was equated to the loved person, causing a rejection of post-mortem changes. In effect, because the body is what connects us to humanity, decomposition destroys the association with the individual. For that reason, the ostentation of funerary rites involved not corpses so much as carefully arranged bodies. The body was washed, dressed and made up in a parody of sleep.<sup>20</sup> This attitude to the dead explains the iconography used in last portraits and paintings of funerary scenes. Echoing the ritual, artists treated the marks of decomposition euphemistically; the body was above all 'the

person who survives'.<sup>21</sup> Contemporary descriptions confirm this hypothesis. On 2 January 1883, the newspaper *Le Figaro* published a long account of the death of Léon Gambetta: 'In the afternoon, Mr. Gambetta's features, which had throughout the morning retained a look of life, were altered by the casting that was carried out. Mr. Meissonier, who had come to make a portrait of the deceased, had to renounce his endeavour.' Once the remains had been spoiled, the last portrait was no longer possible.

Last portraits thus mostly use the iconographies of beautiful death and the dead body. The first may seem surprising in that it diverges from reality. However, the beauty of the dead (which may in fact derive from the peaceful impression produced by muscular atony or pallor) supports the idea of a gentle death<sup>22</sup> and helps to lessen the pain of bereavement. Private accounts and diaries provide striking examples of this: 'She seemed much taller and much more beautiful than when she was alive';<sup>23</sup> 'A moment after death, the face which was so ugly during life becomes beautiful';<sup>24</sup> 'Have you seen the corpse's smile? Earlier it was gasping, writhing, suffocating; now it glows.'<sup>25</sup> There is great beauty in the figure of *Armand Carrel on his Deathbed* (1836, Versailles, Palace of Versailles and the Trianon), painted by Ary Scheffer. The golden light gives the scene a sense of warmth and highlights the writer's jaw while contrasting with his brown hair. The dead man has a peaceful expression and seems to smile.

It was not just relatives and friends who benefited from the iconography of beautiful death, but heroes and great men too. Works with subjects drawn from fiction or history often depicted beautiful deaths. When Claudius Jacquand presented *The Count of Comminges Recognizing Adelaide* (1836, Rennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts) at the Salon, the exhibition booklet referred to a corpse: 'Comminges sees the icy corpse of Adelaide being lowered into the grave ... he is seized by a dreadful frenzy; he throws himself onto the coffin and falls annihilated onto the lifeless body of the woman he loves.'<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the image presented to the viewer is that of a beautiful death, only slightly paler than the figures around her. This iconography originates in an ancient tradition of 'beautiful death' in the sense of a good death, which has a wide range of meanings. First, it refers to the warrior's noble death. Jean-Pierre Vernant<sup>27</sup> drew attention to the concept of *kalos thanatos* (Greek for 'beautiful death') in the *Iliad* (eighth century BCE) and in Athenian funeral orations. Death in combat was presented as the greatest honour to which a young man could aspire: an exemplary, sacrificial death. The concept was revived by chivalry and the nobility of the Ancien Régime in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries<sup>28</sup> and then remained as a military ideal. Second, beautiful death has a religious meaning, that of the death of saints as related by hagiographic works. After the agony of death, they look peaceful and their uncorrupted bodies give off a pleasant odour: signs thought to attest to the sanctity of their souls. This Christian imaginary was encouraged in the nineteenth century by the resurgence of Catholicism and the veneration of saints.<sup>29</sup> Finally, the picture is completed by the beautiful death of philosophy, which was very influential at the end of the eighteenth century. These different categories have one thing in common: the representation of an ideal that destroys the fear of death by giving it a moral or symbolic value. They were

diverted and reinterpreted in the nineteenth century, taking on a broader meaning to include the death of great men (aristocrats, scientists, writers etc.) manifested in the iconography of beautiful death.

In contrast, cadavers in paintings of military subjects displayed post-mortem changes to a greater extent and at an earlier date. Bodies are depicted in the triviality of death, not to denigrate them as individuals but because of the context. Death is an integral part of war, making the iconography of the corpse acceptable in such paintings. This is especially true because, unlike in last portraits where the dead are identifiable, named individuals, soldiers in military paintings are anonymous. This distance from the viewer allowed artists to avoid aestheticisation. Moreover, war was at that time seen in a positive light<sup>30</sup> that helped to mitigate its impact: 'For a long time, war was just part of the history of societies. Although its consequences were already seen as unpleasant and although painting alluded to its disasters without dwelling on them, it was above all part of a cycle of heroization.'<sup>31</sup> The representation of the dead was, therefore, one of the expected attributes of war paintings. Théophile Gauthier said of Gustave Doré's *Battle of Inkermann* (1857, Versailles, Palace of Versailles and the Trianon) that 'individuality does not substitute for the mass; but the mutual killing, disembowelling, battering takes place within it. The effect is sinister, astounding, magnificent.'<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the genre did include an element of denunciation, expressed by the use of accumulation in paintings. Bodies piled up chaotically represented the increasing number of deaths caused by the growth of armies. Battlefields gradually changed from a place of action into a charnel house, whether in *Louis XV Visiting the Field of Battle at Fontenoy in May 1745* (1840, Paris, Musée de la Santé) by Henri-Félix-Emmanuel Phillipeaux or *The Barricade* (1850, Paris, Louvre Museum) by Jean-Louis Ernest Meissonnier. But not all macabre excesses were tolerated. As Édouard Detaille lamented, dismemberment was first among those forbidden: 'an impression we will never be able to render is that of disfigured corpses, wounded men without arms or legs'.<sup>33</sup> This limit allows us to more accurately define the regime of value of the dead in war paintings. The soldiers lying dead at the front had to be recognisable as people and not just as human remains.

The same concern can be detected in some historical and genre paintings. Society's acceptance of the tragic dimension of certain deaths authorised artists to go further in representing post-mortem changes. As in battlefield paintings, the iconography of the corpse was acceptable only when justified by the event being portrayed, whether a crime, execution or epidemic. The status of the body also depended on the stance of the artist and patron. In a massacre scene, was the aim to paint an incriminating portrait of a ruler, to depict the act of violence or to inspire pity for the victims? Human remains changed status depending on the intention, from victims to collateral damage that was acceptable although unfortunate. In François Flameng's *The Massacre of Machecoul* (1884, Cholet, Musée d'art et d'histoire), the bodies of the slain republicans are piled in a heap, half-naked and bloody, while a group of richly dressed and apparently unperturbed women observe the scene. Nevertheless, the bodies are not painted using the iconography of the corpse, which would have allowed the artist to denounce the horror of the

abuses committed. Instead, he chose a less brutal iconography, that of the dead body, to enable the viewer to identify with the victims. Flameng also took care to show the faces of the dead so as to reduce the emotional distance produced by anonymity.

Bodies in dissection scenes had a status all their own. Such scenes made no attempt to conceal post-mortem changes and depicted bodies in an advanced state of decomposition. This is due to the positive light in which dissection was seen in the medical world. Indeed, dissection was one of the foundations of the revitalisation of medical teaching and research that started in the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>34</sup> For the practice of dissection to be acceptable, however, it was necessary to erase the residual humanity of the dead person. The body was reified as an object, or even as waste once it had been broken up into scattered pieces. As a result, representational choices in this genre are different: artists accentuated the corruption of the flesh and preferred to hide the face.<sup>35</sup> While we can easily distinguish individuals in Théodore Géricault's *The Severed Heads* (1818, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum), his *Anatomical Pieces* (1818, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum), although certainly human, struggle to rise to the level of an individual.

The same respect for post-mortem changes can be seen in works from the end of the century featuring anonymous dead people as their only subject, with no context. In fact, to depict a cadaver for its own sake is to question its status, playing with the presentation of an archetypal figure. Unprecedented artistic research went into paintings like Félix Vallotton's *The Corpse* (1894), where the status of the body moves away from individuality and towards objecthood.

The scale of values becomes even more complicated if we expand our study to include animal carcasses and meat. Surprisingly, dead animals normally receive the same treatment as anonymous bodies, and very few works treat them like flesh on the model of Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox* (1655, Paris, Louvre Museum) or Jean Siméon Chardin's *The Ray* (1728, Paris, Louvre Museum). Works like Théodore Géricault's *Dead Cat* (1820, Paris, Louvre Museum) and Ferdinand Ogé's *Dead Chimpanzee* (1898, Paris, Centre Pompidou) view the animals close up, emphasising muscular atony, but the bodies are not treated like things or food. They are not disfigured or wounded, except by dissection cuts or in specific contexts of hunting trophies or cooking and dining scenes. Likewise, signs of decomposition are rare. Gustave Guillaumet's *Sahara* (1867, Paris, Musée d'Orsay) is one of the few exceptions.

As in Géricault's *Anatomical Pieces* (1818), it is by erasing the individuality of the person or animal – not just by means of anonymity, but also by fragmentation – that we approach a true iconography of matter. To accompany Jules Gouffé's book *The Royal Cookery Book* (1867), the draughtsman Eugène Ronjat produced a large number of wood engravings drawn from nature, and particularly of high meat ranging in colour from brown to grey. Although this meat was not, strictly speaking, rotten (that final stage did not appear before the twentieth century), it reached right to the limit of the scale of values of the dead, at the point where it tips over into waste.



Our last example is religious paintings, where there seems to be a disassociation of status and iconography. Like last portraits, such paintings were resistant to iconographic changes and remained largely untouched by the developments of the motif; they continued to present the dead in an idealised way throughout the century. This makes sense when we consider the iconographic heritage of religious paintings. The representation of the dead in the religious sphere followed two almost completely opposite paths.

The first is the unmitigated representation of torture and death in Christian history. This iconography emerged in the fifteenth century under the influence of the *Devotio moderna* movement, which encouraged meditation on the sufferings of holy figures. Matthias Grünewald undoubtedly produced the most famous examples of the type. This approach experienced a revival in the period we are concerned with, as shown by the popularity of dolorist literature and the veneration of the Instruments of the Passion: ‘The spirituality of the early nineteenth century emphasised the physical pain of Christ the redeemer with unprecedented violence, describing his suffering with the greatest realism.’<sup>36</sup> It was in this context that the iconography of the corpse reappeared in certain works, like Eugène Delacroix’s *Christ on the Cross* (1853, London, National Gallery), which depicts Christ with abundantly bleeding wounds and a greyish skin tone. Note that the iconography remains moderate and does not reach the extremes seen before in the history of art. Indeed, some observers saw decomposition (and particularly that of Jesus) as a denial of resurrection. This limit would not be passed until the end of the century.

The second path is that of the beauty associated with incorruption. Rather than aiming to exploit an efficient means of inspiring contrition in the faithful, the aim here was to transcribe the perfection of the divine. This iconography developed particularly in the seventeenth century, gradually supplanting the crudity of Caravaggesque martyr scenes with a more idealised approach. It was maintained in the nineteenth century by paintings like Paul Delaroche’s *The Young Martyr* (1855, Paris, Louvre Museum). The dead young woman, bathed in light, is so beautiful that it has hard to believe she has drowned.

The dead person is, therefore, sometimes sublimated and sometimes ‘realistic’, depending on whether the work was intended to inspire awe or contrition in the faithful. In contrast to other works depicting the dead, these variations are not due to the regime of value. Whatever iconography is chosen, the remains of Jesus, the saints or biblical figures have the status of sacred bodies. Indeed, Christianity is founded on the incarnation of divinity, unlike the two other major monotheistic religions. The rites of baptism, confirmation and extreme unction manifest the sacredness of the human body destined for resurrection. This is even more evident in the case of Jesus, whose body was sacred even before death. This situation can be likened to the Polish art historian Jan Białostocki’s theory of ‘iconographic gravity’, by which he meant the way in which images take on new meanings depending on context.

## From values to norms

There was thus a range of values associated with human remains: from the sacred body to famous figures, from relatives to anonymous soldiers lying unnoticed on a battlefield and then to remains so decomposed as to be unrecognisable, from animal carcasses to body parts, and finally to high meat. As a theoretical tool, this range allows us to categorise paintings and compare the iconography chosen by each. Beautiful death was for relatives or friends and famous figures, whether real or fictional. The iconography of the dead body was for individuals, anonymous or not. The direct representation of the process of death and decomposition, meanwhile, was reserved for bodies in specific contexts like war, which were always treated as individuals, but also bodies that had lost their value through being dissected or cut into pieces.

It is also interesting to note that the proportion of these different genres in the pictorial output of the nineteenth century varied, and thus that certain regimes of value are under-represented. Historical, martial and religious subjects dominated, while dissection scenes were rare. Attitudes towards the dead in the medical world were, understandably, far from being shared by the rest of society. The importance of certain corpses featuring the motif seems, thus, to correspond to the acceptance of the associated regime of value by the greatest number.

The fact that most artists respected these associations, as shown by the homogeneity of each subject's iconography, also reveals the existence of norms (understood here as widespread conventions that are valued by the group).<sup>37</sup> In fact, the cadaver was a problematic motif. The legitimacy of representing ugliness and/or arousing disgust has long been contested in art, to the extent that Carole Talon-Hugon talks of a 'theoretical taboo'.<sup>38</sup> One example of this disapproval comes from Johann Herder, for whom 'The painter who used his skills to conjure on canvas a decomposing corpse that caused the viewer to hold his nose ... was (if the story is true) undoubtedly a wretched painter'.<sup>39</sup> Human remains were, however, indispensable to many of the central subjects of Western art, and the establishment of iconographical norms allowed the motif to be painted in an acceptable way. To do so, these norms 'had to be embedded in a system of intelligibility and a moral system shared both by artistic disciplines and by their social and cultural contexts'.<sup>40</sup> The result was the emergence of 'good' and 'bad' ways to paint the dead, in which the value accorded to the body was an important factor.

This hypothesis is supported by the way works were received. Because a norm is defined equally by what it rejects, deviations were punished harshly. In the nineteenth century, two groups acted as regulatory authorities: fine art institutions (the Académie Française, the Minister of Fine Arts, the École des Beaux-Arts, etc.) and critics. Although institutions had more leverage (refusal to show a work at the Salon, lack of reward or purchases), it was art critics, a profession that was growing rapidly at the time, who made and unmade reputations. They played the role of 'norm police', to borrow Frédérique Desbuisson's expression,<sup>41</sup> highlighting and condemning misdemeanours in order to reaffirm the correct aesthetic and so the appropriate iconography of the dead.

Works using the same iconography provoked opposing reactions depending on their subject matter, regardless of the painter's style. These discrepancies speak volumes about the differences in how the motif was perceived, depending on context. Léon Bonnat's *Christ on the Cross* (1874, Paris, Petit Palais) created a scandal. A rumour accused the painter of having nailed a real corpse to a cross for three days to serve as a model. Christ is not actually shown dead in the painting, but the striking realism of his dying body disturbed the public. In fact, he was reproached less for his craftsmanship than for the overly human aspect of the Christ figure: 'one does not paint a Christ as Frans Hals painted a Haarlem innkeeper, and despite the awful skill of the execution, despite the breadth and depth of the rendering, we cannot see in Mr. Bonnat's work anything but a flawed conception, an aesthetic misjudgement'.<sup>42</sup>

In contrast, Georges-Antoine Rochegrosse's *Andromache* (1883, Rouen, Musée des Beaux-Arts) was acclaimed for its violence and macabre lifelike quality.<sup>43</sup> No less than fifteen brutally maimed corpses (including several severed heads and hanged people) share the space with eight protagonists. They display advanced post-mortem changes in the form of subtle variations in skin tone, with postures frozen in rigor mortis and expressions of pain or horror. Nevertheless, according to critics, 'The success of Mr. Rochegrosse's remarkable composition is becoming increasingly clear. It is certainly the capital work of 1883, and the critics and the public unanimously award it the prize of the salon.'<sup>44</sup> The artist received a medal and the painting was bought by the State. The aura of violence surrounding ancient wars served to justify the representation of maimed corpses, while the deliberately funereal subject matter thrilled many observers who complained that the historical genre was running out of steam and presenting overly idealised scenes.

Our last example is the success of Henri Gervex's *Autopsy at the Hôtel-Dieu* (1876, lost work), which depicted, as its name suggests, an autopsy being carried out. Despite the very advanced post-mortem changes visible on the corpse, the artist was also awarded a medal and the work was lauded by critics: '*Autopsy* is certainly one of the best paintings at the Salon, one of those animated by the best spirit, and the artist has a promising future';<sup>45</sup> 'Mr. Gervex has surpassed himself. The medical students live, dissect, listen to the lessons of a Broca or a Clément, and seem to enjoy it with the love of science that characterises these valuable researchers.'<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, the critics never mention the body itself, which is merely implicit: 'the medical students live, dissect'. As in the painting, the body is reduced to its function as a tool of knowledge. Criticism, iconography and subject matter were in agreement about the resulting regime of value. The professionals were not dissecting an individual, but anatomical material; the work's iconography was, therefore, accepted and praised.

These three examples of critical reception confirm the importance of the regime of value associated with human remains and their representation. The picture is, however, more complicated than that. First, the regimes of value associated with the dead were not clear or obvious to everyone, and the critics were rarely unanimous. Irene Perret's study of the critical reception of Antoine-Jean Gros's *Napoleon on the Battlefield of Eylau* (1808) demonstrates this division of opinion.<sup>47</sup> For some,

'the losses of the previous day and the pains of the night are reproduced by ingenious incidents',<sup>48</sup> while others reproached the artist for the size and rendering of the corpses.<sup>49</sup> The work of Georges-Antoine Rochegrosse also had its detractors, despite his great success at the Salon of 1883. The writer Saint Ange lambasted him for having dared 'to depict human physiognomy in the ugliness of its degradation'.<sup>50</sup> Second, regimes of value could vary within a single work (many battle paintings made simultaneous use of the iconography of beautiful death for a general and of the corpse for common soldiers) or for a particular subject. A single work can, thus, reveal the paradox of the dead body, which can be considered either as a person or as an acceptable if unfortunate remnant. This confirms the importance of this criterion, but these different iconographies complicate analysis of the public reception of works. Nuances are subtle, especially as regimes of value evolved throughout the century and varied between individuals. Third, artists were aware of norms and adapted to them; art was not condemned to being the reflection of the society that produced it. This margin for manoeuvre is what distinguishes norm from law. While nothing is exempt from law, it is possible to flout a norm, despite the social cost.

Finally, other factors are also important for understanding the evolution of the motif and what caused it to advance or lag: the gender and age of the body, but also political, economic, cultural and aesthetic issues. Although the decomposition of the body was necessary for the sake of verisimilitude in certain subjects, many commentators reproached artists for these iconographic choices and argued that beauty, even idealised beauty, was the only acceptable purpose of art. This theoretical discrepancy is particularly clear at the end of the century, when the *genre féroce* was at its apogee. In 1896, Henri Pellier lambasted this trend: 'Many, incapable of finding beauty, take refuge in the horrible. It is turning into a museum of horrors: the public is drawn by the shock of the corpse, as in the morgue.'<sup>51</sup> Some movements, like symbolism, also bypassed the question of the regime of value and concentrated on the aesthetic dimension of the motif.<sup>52</sup> In contrast, the popularity of the morgue and of anatomical museums helped to create a taste for macabre horror that was reflected in the choice of subjects at the Salon. The specific requirements of certain genres<sup>53</sup> and exhibition contexts like the Salon must also be taken into account. There were thus various competing paths that make it more difficult to identify the biases at work in the production and reception of works.

As we conclude this brief exploration of the impact of regimes of value on the iconography of human remains, we can do no more than emphasise the importance of taking this criterion into consideration, particularly for periods like the nineteenth century, when attitudes to the dead were changing. Although this factor does not, of course, outweigh the numerous other dimensions that influenced the iconography of such an important motif, and although it was not even always relevant, it enables art historians to add to their analysis an often-neglected perspective on the links between art and society. The examples we have discussed show the extent to which it can be a precious clue and sometimes even the key to understanding the iconography of dead bodies.

## Notes

Translated by Cadenza Academic Translations

- 1 L.-V. Thomas, *Le cadavre, de la biologie à l'anthropologie* (Verviers, Éditions complexe, 1980), p. 53.
- 2 The term refers to a portrait painted after death, on the deathbed. See J. Bolloch and E. Héran (eds), *Le dernier portrait*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Musée d'Orsay, 5 March to 26 May 2002 (Paris, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2002).
- 3 L.-V. Thomas, *Rites de mort* (Paris, Fayart, 1985), p. 26.
- 4 See P. Dubus, *L'art et la mort, réflexions sur les pouvoirs de la peinture à la renaissance* (Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2006); S. Girel, *La vie du cadavre dans les arts visuels contemporains* [Research report] (ANR, 2011); M. Théron, 'Entre théorie et pratique, la représentation des corps morts dans la peinture française au XVIIIe siècle', in A. Carol and I. Renaudet (eds), *La mort à l'œuvre, usages et représentations du cadavre dans l'art* (Aix-en-Provence, Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2013), pp. 15–38; A. Richier, 'L'esthétique du cadavre. Représentations du corps mort dans la peinture occidentale de la Renaissance au romantisme', in H. Guy, A. Jeanjean and A. Richier (eds), *Rencontres autour du cadavre, acte du colloque de Marseille*, BMVR 15, 16, 17 December 2010, GAAF (online), 2012. Although there are no studies of French nineteenth-century painting that address this subject specifically, it has been discussed in the context of related topics (violence, horror) and categories (pictorial genres, artistic movements, monographs on artists). In most cases, however, such discussions touch only briefly on the question of the regime of value associated with human remains.
- 5 Cemeteries moved further away, regulation of areas housing human remains, changes in funerary rituals, the veneration of remains, etc. See R. Bertrand, 'La transition funéraire, une rapide synthèse', in R. Bertrand, *Mort et Mémoire. Provence, XVIIIe–XXe siècles* (Marseille, La Thune, 2011), pp. 21–56.
- 6 J. Bolloch and E. Héran (eds), *Le dernier portrait*; M. Miller, 'Photographier la guerre en 1870-1871', in M. Benoistel, S. Le Ray-Burimi and C. Pommier (eds), *France–Allemagne(s) 1870–1871. La guerre, la Commune, les mémoires* (Paris, Gallimard & Musée de l'Armée, 2017), pp. 97–103; F. Robichon, 'De la peinture à la photographie et inversement', in L. Gervereau (ed.), *Voir, ne pas voir la guerre, Histoire des représentations photographiques de la guerre* (Paris, Somogy, 2001).
- 7 F. Sborgi, 'La théâtralisation de la mort dans la sculpture funéraire au XIXe siècle', in R. Bertrand, A. Carol and J.-N. Pelen (eds), *Les narrations de la mort* (Aix-en-Provence, Presses universitaires de Provence, 2005), pp. 225–39; A. Lenormand-Romain, *La mémoire de marbre la sculpture funéraire en France, 1804–1914* (Paris, Bibliothèque de la ville de Paris, 1995); A. Pingeot, *La sculpture française au XIXe siècle*, exhibition catalogue, Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, 10 April to 28 July 1986 (Paris, Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1986).
- 8 See A. Gefen, *La mimesis* (Paris, Flammarion, 2003).
- 9 F. Cousiniée, *Beautés fuyantes et passagères: La représentation et ses 'objets-limites' aux XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, Gérard Montfort, 2005), p. 200.

- 10 C-A. Du Fresnoy, *De Arte Graphica*, trans. J. Dryden (London, W. Rogers, 1695), p. 56.
- 11 C. Baudelaire, 'The Museum of Classics at Bazar Bonne-Nouvelle', in *Art in Paris 1845–1862: Salons and Other Exhibitions*, trans. and ed. J. Mayne (Oxford, Phaidon, 1965), pp. 34–5.
- 12 F. Pupil, 'La mort de Charles le téméraire vue par les romantiques', *Le Pays lorrain: journal de la société d'archéologie lorraine et des Musées lorrains*, 77 (1996), 32–45; F. Pupil, *La mort du Téméraire: peintures d'histoire*, exhibition catalogue, Nancy, Musée des Beaux-Arts, 7 April to 18 May 1997 (Nancy, Ville de Nancy, 1997).
- 13 P. Barante, *Vie des Ducs de Bourgogne*, vol. 2 (Nantes, 1834), p. 82.
- 14 E. Charton, 'Beaux-Arts', *Le Magasin pittoresque*, 5 (1837), p. 84. Translator's note: This quotation is our translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of foreign language material cited in this article are our own.
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- 16 See P. Aries, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. P. M. Ranum (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975); M. Vovelle, *La Mort et l'Occident de 1300 à nos jours* (Paris, Gallimard, 1983).
- 17 Particularly the works of Régis Bertrand, Anne Carol and Bruno Bertherat.
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- 19 E. Belmas and S. Nonnis-Vigilante (eds), *L'orchestration de la mort: Les funérailles, des temps modernes à l'époque contemporaine* (Villeneuve d'Ascq, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2017); Bertrand, 'La transition funéraire'.
- 20 See A. Carol, 'Faire un "beau" cadavre: difficultés techniques et ambiguïtés esthétiques de l'embaumement au XIXe siècle (France)', in H. Guy, A. Jeanjean and A. Richier (eds), *Rencontres autour du cadavre, acte du colloque de Marseille*, BMVR 15, 16, 17 December 2010, GAAF (online), 2012, 139–42.
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