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***The Barricade, Rue de la Mortellerie, June 1848:* A Reflection of Class Tension in Nineteenth-Century Paris**

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Jean-Louis Ernest Meissonier's unidealized depiction of the 1848 Paris workers' riots, *The Barricade, Rue de Mortellerie: June 1848*, 1849 (fig. 1), not only presents a condemnation of civil rebellion, but also demonstrates the growing tensions between the social classes in Paris. Compared with another work depicting French revolution, such as Eugene Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830 (fig. 2), Meissonier's irreverent depiction of the rioter's corpses amplifies the sense of impartiality to the brutal nature of the massacre, as well as the reason behind the insurrection.¹ A depiction of the aftermath of the conflict, the work delivers an unflinching portrayal of the deadliness of rebellion as seen from the perspective of the National Guard, of which Meissonier himself was enlisted. The violent uprising was the response of the working class to the elimination of the National Workshops; their closure was an attempt by middle-class Parisians to reduce

1. "Delacroix's *Liberty Guiding the People* of 1830 is not just the last picture where worker and bourgeois fight side by side, standing united under Marianne's wings. It is also the last picture where worker and bourgeois are drawn as individuals of the same species. In later images they face each other as enemies. But these enemies do not confront each other as two human beings on equal footing, nor do they fight man to man. Rather, they relate to each other as an individual citizen relates to the faceless masses—as in Baudelaire's prose poems, ... Émile Zola's *Germinal*, and the vast majority of other novels, books, and poems about the working class, all the way through the early twentieth century." Stefan Jonsson, *A Brief History of the Masses: Three Revolutions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 60.

the growing power of the lower classes.² As a member of both the middle class, also known as the bourgeoisie, and the National Guard, Meissonier is proud in his defeat of the rioters, as well as blind to the strife of the working class, and this is evident within the work itself.

Scholars have previously maintained that Meissonier's painting pays homage to the many working-class Parisians that died during the uprising. For example, Constance Cain Hungerford contends, "Meissonier thus dignifies the rebels with devotion to a nation ideal that he shared, even if he defied republican values less radically and disapproved of violence as a means to pursue them."³ Hungerford and other scholars have explored the possibility that *The Barricade* represents a dedication to those who died during the rebellion, but few have explored the contention that this painting is not only a warning to future rebels, but also a manifestation of the class tensions between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in Paris in the nineteenth century.

Unlike other works representing events in French history, such as Meissonier's own 1807, *Friedland*, 1875 (fig. 3), and Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819 (fig. 4), *The Barricade* presents the event's conclusion. The warfare is over; the painting contains neither a struggle nor glory—only death.⁴ Bodies of dead rebels lie haphazardly on top of one another, undignified, the purpose for their insurrection incomplete. *The Barricade* depicts the deadly consequences of this uprising, from the middle-class perspective, as the artist was of the bourgeoisie. In illustrating the absolute overpowering of the rioters, Meissonier is attempting to

2. After radicals staged a demonstration on May 15th, 1848 in response to the loss of the recent elections, the Constituent Assembly sought to destroy Parisian radicalism by stopping new unemployed from joining the national workshops created for the guaranteed right to work, and on June 21st, dismantling the workshops completely. The closing of these workshops inspired revolt in east Paris. "In four days of brutal fighting the republican general Eugène Cavaignac systematically destroyed the barricades, killed between 1,500 and 3,000 insurgents, and arrested 15,000 suspects." W. Scott Haine, *The History of France* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), 107.

3. Constance Cain Hungerford, *Ernest Meissonier: Master in his Genre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 54.

4. "Ernest Meissonier's painting *The Barricade* was made once the smoke had cleared out." Jonsson, *A Brief History of the Masses: Three Revolutions*, 61.

reassure not only himself, but also the rest of his social class, that the current order will be maintained. Meissonier's *The Barricade* exemplifies the disconnect between the middle and working classes in nineteenth-century Paris, and this is evident with the work's visual elements and principles of design, the artist's biography, and the recent change between class alliances after the Revolution of 1830.

The Meaning Behind of Meissonier's Choice of Visual Elements

The Barricade is different from any other work that Meissonier had ever created. Devoted mostly to large and meticulous war scenes, the artist's other works depicting themes of conflict place the viewer right in the height of action. Consider his *The Siege of Paris (1870-1871)*, 1884 (fig. 5): although this work depicts dead men in the foreground, the rest of the image is busy with implied action and movement. The personification of Paris, a woman with a lion skin on her head, stands triumphantly under the French flag as family members of the surviving soldiers march from the battlefield. In *The Barricade*, there is no implied movement or valiant personification, just the remnants of the four-day civil war. Like *The Siege of Paris, 1870, Friedland* is a scene of Meissonier's that pertains to warfare in which the canvas seems to burst forth with the implied movement of the soldiers. Even though, like *The Barricade, 1807, Friedland* depicts a defeat, the tones of the two paintings are entirely different. The vibrant color palate and meticulous attention to detail in 1807, *Friedland* create a sense of mobility and celebration in Meissonier's remembrance of Napoleon's victory over the Russian army. Hundreds of horses, and the soldiers they carry, seem to charge forth towards the viewer, Napoleon stands in the middle of the composition, raising his hat, and smoke from a cannon billows in the distance. Compare this scene, bustling with action, with *The Barricade*, and it becomes evident that, although both works portray a loss of victory in war, Meissonier intended entirely different tones. The dull colors chosen by the artist and the absolutely lack of implied movement in *The Barricade* radiate a sense of finality and totality to the defeat of the

rebels depicted in this image.

The basic form and content of Meissonier's *The Barricade* all contribute to the work's deeper meaning, assisting to celebrate the quelling of the riot, as well as dehumanize and make dangerous the working class. Rather small⁵, the viewer must stand very close to the work in order to grasp the image, immersing the viewer in the gore and defeat.⁶ At a distance, the viewer does not recognize the painting's subject matter; however, at a close proximity, the viewer would make a shocking realization: the cobblestone street is covered with a mound of dead bodies. The elements of the image include a jumbled heap of figures resting on the street in the foreground, and a faded, blurred alleyway in the background, the Rue de Mortellerie. The figures in the center foreground, although having died during warfare, are depicted without their weapons; their bodies splay awkwardly out on the street, undignified in the absolute lack of respect for their memory. Although five faces can be seen, the eye is not drawn to their faces; the hands and feet of these dead men is what attract attention.⁷ In this way, the artist successfully dehumanizes the rioters, further attesting to the danger accompanied with the working class in power.

The artist composes the corpses using implied and intersecting lines, demonstrating the complete chaos and destruction caused by the rebellion. The only somewhat vibrant colors engaged by Meissonier are a rioter's red pants and the freshly spilt red blood on the corpses. He also includes a cool blue in the shirts of the figures, altogether possibly symbolizing

5. The painting measures 21 x 26 centimeters

6. Jonsson describes seeing the work in person: "It's a small picture. From a few feet away, the motif looks crammed, its colors pale and tarnished. It's hard to see anything but an abandoned street lined by houses ... As the viewer approaches the image, he or she discovers that the pavement consists of human corpses."

Jonsson, *A Brief History of the Masses: Three Revolutions*, 61.

7. Hungerford, *Ernest Meissonier: Master in his Genre*, 54

the French flag.⁸ The implied texture of the rioters' bunched clothing testifies to the great physical activity they went through during the conflict. The lifeless pose of the dead figures is the key to the mood of the painting; they lay on top of one another gracelessly and without dignity, spirit, or life. Their cause does not seem so important now, and they lie open without respect in the street.⁹ The formal elements of *The Barricade* reflect directly the bourgeoisie's opinion of the proletariat: sub-human, unimportant, and potentially dangerous.

Meissonier as a Member of the Bourgeoisie and the National Guard

Meissonier established himself as a noted artist during the July Monarchy of 1830, thirty years after the French Revolution. Hungerford discusses the artist's middle class affiliation: "A narrative of political challenge to lingering birthright privilege, however, overlooks the extent to which a broad middle-class public was gradually forging an identity and refashioning French society according to its own values and priorities. Meissonier's emergence is closely linked to the entrenchment of the middle class, depending on it and in turn contributing to its process of self-definition."¹⁰

One can understand then, his attachment to the bourgeoisie, and his desire to perpetuate the status of those who bought his art, assisting him to become an esteemed French artist. Meissonier created his works for those of the middle class: those who were able to read and write, had a moderate and steady income, and were well versed in the arts and sciences popular in Paris at the time,

8. Innes agrees, "As an epistemological model, *The Barricade* indicates through symbolic imagery (along with perspective, the colours of the Republican flag mingle together in the ruins of bodies, blood and clothes) the need the whole occasionally feels to have its parts subjected to the imperative of ideal representation." Randy Norman Innes, *On the Limits of the Work of Art: The Fragment in Visual Culture* (Rochester: The University of Rochester Press, 2008), 75.

9. Jonsson describes the treatment of the bodies after the riot: "Some days later, when the bodies had been identified, they were packed on a cart, transported outside the city wall, and thrown into a mass grave." Jonsson, *A Brief History of the Masses: Three Revolutions*, 63.

10. Hungerford, *Ernest Meissonier: Master in his Genre*, 9.

such as theater, fashion, and literature.¹¹ By creating paintings that would appease the middle class, Meissonier becomes completely immersed in his own social group.

The title of “bourgeois” defines a member of the French social class that was not of the aristocracy, but an urban upper class. By the eighteenth century, this class sect was largely associated with, by the lower class, “de jure idleness,” or using the law to avoid manual labor.¹² In fact, in Paris, there were laws that defined what a member of the *bourgeois de Paris* was able to do for employment; they could not engage in any work that requires their hands.¹³ In following these regulations, a member of the bourgeoisie would receive many fiscal advantages, and these advantages, as well as the title, was hereditary.¹⁴ Considering these rewards given to the bourgeoisie, it becomes evident why the working classes hated this emerging social group; this faction of non-nobility was treated as aristocracy, and even paid to avoid manual labor.¹⁵ The “idleness” statutes enforced by the French government also explains why the middle class feared the growing power of the proletariat; they did not want their comfortable way of life to be jeopardized.

In 1848, when the few rights of the working poor were removed, they chose to rebel. Unlike the Revolution of 1830, the National Guard quickly quelled the rioters; a service in which many members of the bourgeois enlisted, including the young artist Meissonier, who sketched *The Barricade* after witnessing the conflicts. The subject matter of this painting depicts an actual event in French history, and is therefore all the more tangible after

11. Ibid.

12. Sarah Maza. “Luxury, Morality, and Social Class: Why There Was No Middle-Class Consciousness in Prerevolutionary France.” *The Journal of Modern History* 69, no. 2 (June 1997): 11.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. The writer Marivaux stated in 1717, “The bourgeois of Paris, Madame, is a mixed animal, who takes after the great lord and the people. When he has a grandeur in his manners he is always an ape; when he is petty he is natural: thus he is noble by imitation, and plebian by character.” Maza, “Luxury, Morality, and Social Class: Why There Was No Middle-Class Consciousness in Prerevolutionary France,” 14.

viewing the work.¹⁶ The most telling piece of evidence is the *way* Meissonier depicted the event; he could have illustrated any point in time from those four days of rebellion, but he decided to paint the end—the absolute defeat of the rioters.¹⁷ What the artist is disregarding in his depiction of the event, however, is the reason *why* these Parisians felt like they had no choice but to fight. The working class rioted in 1848 because their right to work had been taken away in the dissolving of the National Workshops.

The Barricade represents the gap between the middle and working classes, not only economically, but empathetically as well. Instead of listening to the needs of all Parisians, the bourgeoisie—including Meissonier—used this insurrection as a way to reason the manipulation of the lower class. Jonsson elaborates:

...With Meissonier's agonizing picture of the killed workers, a social divide is made complete. The excluded part of the population has been transformed into a mass and made invisible, turned into matter and made harmless. This process of social splitting is mirrored in the semantic transformation that 'the masses' undergo between 1789 and 1848.¹⁸

Jonsson contends that this image is important to class relations in Paris in the 1800s because it finalized the divide between the working and middle classes, who fought side by side in 1830 to topple to monarchy. *The Barricade* is the manifestation of class struggle in nineteenth-century Paris; with this image, Meissonier epitomizes the new feelings of the middle class towards the “violent” and barbaric working class. The manner in which the dead figures are portrayed is most telling of Meissonier's

16. Hungerford explains, “In referring to the street as the rue de la Mortellerie, Meissonier used an earlier designation derived from the mortar masons who had settled there. The syllable mort (death) had proved too horribly appropriate during the 1832 cholera epidemic, which in the space of three months had claimed nineteen thousand victims in Paris, three hundred of them living in this street, and in 1835 residents had requested the street be renamed,” Hungerford, *Ernest Meissonier: Master in his Genre*, 52.

17. T.J. Clark writes, “Meissonier intended [The Barricade] as a warning to future rebels: look, this is the way revolutionaries end up!” Jonsson, *A Brief History of the Masses: Three Revolutions*, 61.

18. Jonsson, *A Brief History of the Masses: Three Revolutions*, 63.

attitudes towards the proletariat; he depicts the people of Paris—the working class—as anonymous, disgraced sub-humans. The anonymity of the masses is reflected in the artist's rendering of the corpses faces; they appear strikingly similar to one another.¹⁹ In depicting the faces of the killed soldiers similarly, Meissonier is exemplifying the way he and his social class viewed the proletariat; faceless, nameless, and dangerous.

An early Daguerreotype taken by a M. Thibault, *Barricades before the Attack, Rue Saint-Maur*, 1848 (fig. 6), reveals an actual barricade prepared before the day's rebellion began. Parisians engaged in barricade warfare time and time again during civil conflicts because of the protection it offered from bullets and cannons. Thibault's image illuminates the difference between a barricade's structural reality and the way Meissonier depicted it in his 1848 painting. *The Barricade* in the Daguerreotype is tall in height, composed of many paving stones from the street, and also of some cannon wheels and other wooden objects. *The Barricade* in Meissonier's painting, however, is entirely different; the rioter's stronghold is merely a few paving stones inches high. The rebels *themselves* replace their barricade; they become the very blockade in which Parisians relied on so often throughout their history. In depicting the dead as *The Barricade*, Meissonier calls attention to the foolishness of such a warfare tactic. The artist presents the figures in the same shades and colors of the pavement they lie upon; even the shape of their heads mirror the rubble and rocks on which they lay.²⁰ These rebels are degraded in their similarity to the paving stones, and in taking away their human qualities, Meissonier minimizes the sympathy for them that would be held by the viewer.

The Influential Power of the Bourgeoisie as Reflected in 1830 and 1848 Paintings

Eugene Hagnauer's depiction of the 1848 riots, *The Burning of the Chateau de D'Eau*, 1848 (fig. 7), presents an entirely different view of

19. "If the men all look the same, this is due not to any natural similarity but to the way they were treated," Jonsson, *A Brief History of the Masses: Three Revolutions*, 63.

20. Ibid, 61.

the event than Meissonier does. Hagnauer chose to portray Paris at the height of the conflict; rioters advance towards the National Guard, while they in turn fire into the crowd. A barricade is visible in the lower left corner, the location of Meissonier's setting. The tones of the two images are completely different: Hagnauer's painting depicts action, conflict, and intensity, while Meissonier presents cessation and finality. In *The Burning of the Chateau de D'Eau*, the rebels are full of purpose, a force to be reckoned with. *The Barricade*, the rioters seem trivial, blending in with their landscape. So, why did Meissonier choose to paint a hopeless, brutal scene of death? When compared with Hagnauer's painting, Meissonier is voicing his opinion of the "dangerous" proletariat class.

Focusing now on Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*: both this painting and *The Barricade* depict civil revolution that featured barricade warfare, but that is the only similar characteristic they share. In Delacroix's image, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat fight side by side during the Revolution of 1830.²¹ The painting is triumphant, passionate, and like *The Siege of Paris*, contains an image of personification: Liberty. The tone of these two works is completely different, for they contain two different messages that the artists are trying to communicate. With the Revolution of 1830, the lower and middle classes of France fought together against the aristocracy, bringing the reign of Charles X to a close, and instituting a constitutional monarchy. Consider, similarly, Jean Victor Schnetz's *Battle Outside the Hôtel de Ville*, 1830 (fig. 8). Like Delacroix's, in this painting, the community and respect founded between proletariat and the bourgeoisie in 1830 is fully realized: a middle-class man dressed in expensive clothing clutches a young lower-class boy, clothed in a peasant's blouse, as he raises the torn French flag. Another member of the working class is presented to the left of the two focal figures, again wearing a blouse, as well as a kerchief wrapped upon his head. Schnetz's painting presents the alliance formed during 1830 between the two classes; eighteen years later, however, the working class will have lost an ally. In Delacroix and Schnetz's paintings, the message is clear: the fighting cause of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is one for the betterment of France, and this is evident with the presence of

21. See footnote 2.

the national flag that waves triumphantly in the center of both. In these two works, the aristocracy is made the enemy, forcing the young children that are depicted to brave a man's fight. In 1848, as illustrated in *The Barricade*, the proletariat has become the enemy, this time of the aristocracy, the French government, and the middle class. In Meissonier's use of the French flag colors, the national flag is again present, implying that the working classes' defeat was for the betterment of France. The fact that an alliance with the bourgeoisie can determine the outcome of a war demonstrates the power that this community held at the time. In their appeasing of the middle class with statues and tax breaks, the aristocracy won over this influential social group, securing the safety of the wealthy.

Conclusion: *The Barricade* as Bourgeois Propaganda

The Barricade serves as a representation of the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in Paris in the nineteenth century. Meissonier, as a member of the middle class, a definite "have," with his two homes and large bank account, feared an uprising of the working class. Upsetting the status quo would change not only his life, but also the entire bourgeoisie. This painting serves as a warning to all other conspirators or rebels, desiring to inspire fear and terror in their hearts. This is why the image is so ghastly and gory; he wants to scare the working class into shuffling along with their lives the way they are now. These dead rioters all lay, unglorified, their purpose unachieved. Meissonier's image reflects the arduous and constant class struggles in France in the nineteenth century. Keeping the class tensions in mind, it becomes evident that Meissonier created *The Barricade* as a piece of propaganda. If a middle-class citizen happened to be sympathetic to the working class, they certainly would not be after viewing this image, for Meissonier has carefully presented rioters in a way that inspires fear and terror to the viewer.

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Figures



Figure 1. Jean-Louis Ernest Meissonier, *The Barricade, Rue de la Mortellerie, June 1848*, 1849. Oil on canvas.



Figure 2. Eugene Delacroix. *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830. Oil on canvas.



Figure 3. Jean-Louis Ernest Meissonier. *1807, Friedland*. 1875. Oil on canvas



Figure 4. Théodore Géricault. *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819. Oil on canvas



Figure 5. Jean-Louis Ernest Meissonier. *The Siege of Paris (1870-1871)*, 1884. Oil on canvas.



Figure 6. *The Barricade in rue Saint-Maur-Popincourt before the attack by General Lamoricière's troops, Sunday 25 June 1848*, June 25, 1848. Daguerreotype.



Figure 7. Eugene Haugnauer. *The Burning of the Chateau de D'Eau*, 1848. Oil on canvas



Figure 8. Jean Victor Schnetz. *Battle Outside the Hôtel de Ville*, 1830. Oil on canvas