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BULLISH, BEARISH, OR SHEEPISH? THE ALLEGORICAL FIGURE IN
FRENCH ART OF THE LATER NINETEENTH CENTURY

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In public and official French art of the later nineteenth century numerous examples attest to the continued use of the allegorical figure; Bartholdi's monumental torchbearing Liberty and so many torchbearing naked Truths were only some of the figures projecting a felt (or hoped for) commonality of ideas. Yet, as useful for centuries as this message-bearing device had been, there are indications that it was now a faltering convention. Critics from at least the late eighteenth century, including Diderot and Stendhal, denounced the convention as old-fashioned, outmoded or embarrassing. Put in terms borrowed from the stockmarket to indicate upward and downward swing, it is not always clear whether the trend in currency of the aesthetic mode was bullish or bearish or whether its use was not sheepish.

In the century of Romanticism and Realism many artists interested in fashioning serious new images wished to reduce apparent stylistic artifice and emotional distance. Thus, the habitual strategy of allegory to distinguish itself from the everyday and ordinary through stylistic and psychic remove was called into question. One problem was whether the allegorical figure was elastic and could be made pertinent to new situations and ideas. To function the device had to be recognized as such; to be successful, the meaning

of the allegory had to be communicated. Symbolism, at the other side of a generational gap was generally more personal and hermetic in nature. In a series of important and scathing caricatures Cham (Comte Amédée Noé) mocked the patent artificiality employed by the allegorist (the torchbearer, etc.) and castigated the notion of accommodating ancient, historico-classicizing figures to new ideas. In Cham's caricatures there is a hint that the anthropomorphic embodiment of concepts such as "Progress" is seriously outdated.

Nevertheless, realizing the importance of allegory as a transmitter of meaning, a number of artists tried to offset criticism through inventive solutions for its use. Delacroix, Ingres, and Couture in well-known examples combined the real and allegorical (this was not new, cf. Rubens et al.). But, critics like Théophile Gautier lamented the mixing of the several orders or reality. More circumspect and perhaps apologetic in introducing several levels of reality were Glaize (The Spectacle of Folly) and Gérôme (The Poet's Dream). In the work of the Spanish artist Nonell, the inadequacy through bland weakness of the allegorical figure is plain.

Courbet and Manet, also interested in allegory, tried to make it pertinent; though it is debatable whether the former's Demoiselles de Village represents Charity or whether Manet's Nana is a modern (and moralizing) Voluptas. Neither heeded the constraint of allegory to be somehow set off from the passing scene.

The highly efficient traditional banderoled and labeled allegorical figure continued to function publicly and valuably as a message bearer within the context of satire and caricature. Here, the

figure could still be half-draped and classicizing and is still so portrayed in so many political cartoons of our own day. If by the later part of the nineteenth century the cultural authority needed for allegory which expounds no longer held sway, caricature, which ridicules and depends on expressionist style to set it off from the ordinary, did.

In the late nineteenth century one must differentiate strait-laced public, "museum," and caricatural art before one can determine how allegory was faring.