

**Charles Baudelaire**  
**“On the Heroism of Modern Life,” from *Salon of 1846***

Many people will attribute the present decadence in painting to our decadence in behavior.<sup>1</sup> This dogma of the studios, which has gained currency among the public, is a poor excuse of the artists. For they had a vested interest in ceaselessly depicting the past; it is an easier task, and one that could be turned to good account by the lazy.

It is true that the great tradition has been lost, and that the new one is not yet established.

But what *was* this great tradition, if not a habitual, everyday idealization of ancient life - a robust and martial form of life, a state of readiness on the part of each individual, which gave him a habit of gravity in his movements and of majesty, or violence, in his attitudes? To this should be added a public splendor which found its reflection in private life. Ancient life was a great *parade*. It ministered above all to the pleasure of the eye, and this day-to-day paganism has marvelously served the arts.

Before trying to distinguish the epic side of modern life, and before bringing examples to prove that our age is no less fertile in sublime themes than past ages, we may assert that since all centuries and all peoples have had their own form of beauty, so inevitably we have ours. That is in the order of things.

All forms of beauty, like all possible phenomena, contain an element of the eternal and an element of the transitory - of the absolute and of the particular. Absolute and eternal beauty does not exist, or rather it is only an abstraction skimmed from the general surface of different beauties. The particular element in each manifestation comes from the emotions: and just as we have our own particular emotions, so we have our own beauty.

Except for Hercules on Mount Oeta, Cato of Utica and Cleopatra (whose suicides are not *modern* suicides), what suicides do you find represented in the old masters? ... As for the garb, the outer husk, of the modern hero, although the time is past when every little artist dressed up as a grand panjandrum and smoked pipes as long as duckrifles, nevertheless the studios and the world at large are still full of people who would like to poeticize *Antony* with a Greek cloak and a parti-colored vesture.

But all the same, has not this much-abused garb its own beauty and its native charm? Is it not the necessary garb of our suffering age, which wears the symbol of a perpetual mourning even upon its thin black shoulders? Note, too, that the dress-coat and the frock-coat not only possess their political beauty, which is an expression of universal equality, but also their poetic beauty, which is an expression of the public soul - an immense cortege of undertaker's mutes (mutes in love, political mutes, bourgeois mutes ... ). We are each of us celebrating some funeral.

A uniform livery of affliction bears witness to equality; and as for the eccentrics, whose violent and contrasting colors used easily to betray them to the eye, today they are satisfied with slight nuances in design in cut, much more than in color. Look at those grinning creases which play like serpents around mortified flesh - have they not their own mysterious grace? [ ... ]

Let not the tribe of colorists be too indignant. For if it is more difficult, their task is thereby only the more glorious. Great colorists know how to create color with a black coat, a white cravat and a grey background.

But to return to our principal and essential problem, which is to discover whether we possess a specific beauty, intrinsic to our new emotions, I observe that the majority of artists who

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<sup>1</sup> These two types of decadence must not be confused; one has regard to the public and its feelings, the other concerns the studios alone.

have attacked modern life have contented themselves with public and official subjects - with our victories and our political heroism. Even so, they do it with an ill grace, and only because they are commissioned by the government which pays them. However there are private subjects which are very much more heroic than these.

The pageant of fashionable life and the thousands of floating existences - criminals and kept women - which drift about in the underworld of a great city; the *Gazette des Tribunaux* and the *Moniteur* all prove to us that we have only to open our eyes to recognize our heroism.

Suppose that a minister, baited by the opposition's impertinent questioning, has given expression once and for all - with that proud and sovereign eloquence which is proper to him - to his scorn and disgust for all ignorant and mischief-making oppositions. The same evening you will hear the following words buzzing round you on the Boulevard des Italiens: 'Were you in the Chamber today? and did you see the minister? Good Heavens, how handsome he was! I have never seen such scorn!'

So there *are* such things as modern beauty and modern heroism!

And a little later; - 'I hear that K. - or F. - has been commissioned to do a medal on the subject; but he won't know how to do it - he has no understanding for these things.'

So artists can be more, or less, fitted to understand modern beauty! [ . . . ]

The life of our city is rich in poetic and marvelous subjects. We are enveloped and steeped as though in an atmosphere of the marvelous; but we do not notice it.

The *nude* - that darling of the artists, that necessary element of success - is just as frequent and necessary today as it was in the life of the ancients; in bed, for example or in the bath, or in the anatomy theatre. The themes and resources of painting equally abundant and varied; but there is a new element - modern beauty. [ . . . ]