

# Obituaries

## Michel Laclotte (1929–2021)

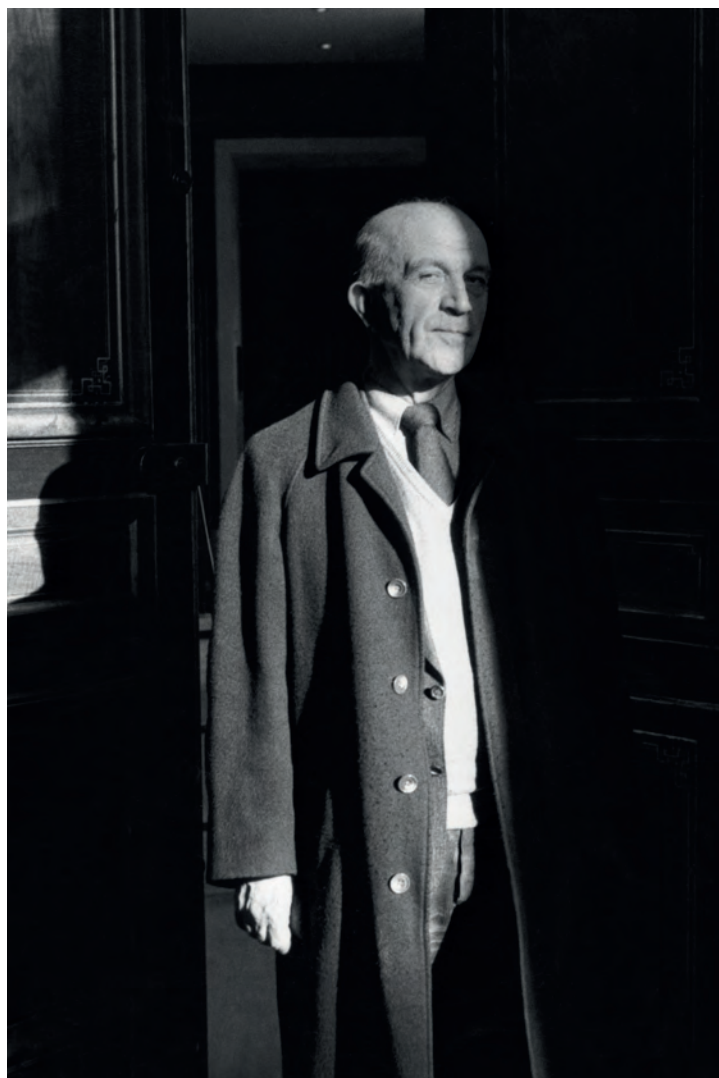
With his leading role in both the making of the modern Louvre and the creation of the Musée d'Orsay, Michel Laclotte was the outstanding French museum director of his generation. The series of important exhibitions he curated made late twentieth-century Paris a meeting place for art historians from around the world.

by PIERRE ROSENBERG

**T**HE CREATOR OF THE modern Louvre, Michel Laclotte, who died on 10th August at the age of ninety-one, was without question the museum's greatest director since Dominique Vivant Denon (1747–1825). It is now often forgotten how run down the Musée du Louvre was in the years after the Second World War, despite the efforts of André Malraux to rehabilitate it while he was Minister for Cultural Affairs in 1958–69. As Laclotte said himself with unfeigned modesty, he was lucky – he arrived at the right time. The complex and comprehensive restructuring of the museum was made possible by a variety of factors: the decision in 1981 to hand over to the Louvre the immense spaces freed up by the departure of the Ministry of Finance, which until then had occupied the wing on the rue de Rivoli; President Mitterrand's decision to entrust the renovation to the architect I.M. Pei without holding a competition; the presence of curators who were suffering from the museum's state of neglect and were willing to devote themselves body and soul to this endeavour; and the availability of substantial financial resources. Laclotte, first as Chief Curator of the Department of Paintings (1966–87) and then as the museum's director, devoted himself to this rehabilitation with obstinacy, determination, conviction, patience and skill until he retired in 1995.

Among the many problems the Louvre faced was the question whether the museum's collection of paintings – the largest and, along with that of the National Gallery, London, most comprehensive in the world – should be presented in chronological order, which would have made it possible, for example, to group in a single space all the paintings by the Caravagisti, whether Italian, North European, French or Spanish. The layout of the museum ruled this option out, however. It was assumed that the French school from Enguerrand Quarton and Jean Fouquet to Ingres and Delacroix would be presented in the Grande Galerie, that long corridor so ill-suited to the presentation of such works. That would, however, have put the Louvre at the risk of being accused of chauvinism. After much consideration, this place of honour was reserved for the Italian paintings, which proved to be the right decision. There were many battles during Laclotte's tenure, that over the construction of Pei's glass pyramid being the most famous. In each dispute, he was able to put forward convincing arguments.

Laclotte's role in the creation of the Musée d'Orsay, from the development stage that began in 1972 to the museum's opening to the public in 1986, was no less important. The Gare d'Orsay was scheduled for demolition and plans by several renowned architects for a hotel to be built in its place had been exhibited at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. But President Georges Pompidou, who had been responsible for the deplorable destruction of Les Halles, wanted to make amends and he spared Orsay. Paris lacked a museum worthy of the name that honoured the remarkable history of French art in the second half of the nineteenth



Michel Laclotte in 2006. (Courtesy Musée du Louvre, Paris; © Agence VU; photograph Gérard Rondeau).

century, from Courbet to Cézanne. Yet Laclotte was a specialist in the Siennese primitives and the Avignon school, and knew nothing – or at least not much – about avant-garde movements in Germany, Switzerland or Italy, the English decorative arts, the Arts and Crafts movement, the Wiener Werkstätte or photography. He visited the museums devoted to this period and read everything that had to be read. The Orsay would not be merely a museum of French painting, or even of painting, but would

be an encyclopaedic museum, open to all the arts of the period. Laclotte's exemplary acquisition policy extended across Europe. Against all the odds, which included objections from Valéry Giscard d'Estaing – and for a time from Mitterrand – Laclotte imposed his wishes and his ideas about the period, thus determining what the Orsay was to cover and ensuring it would become not a historical museum of the nineteenth century but a museum of its arts. He was a great builder of a type that French museums have rarely known.

Born in Saint-Malo, Laclotte took an early interest in the Italian primitives. His exhibition *From Giotto to Bellini*, held at the Orangerie des Tuileries in 1956, brought together the best of the Italian primitives in French public collections. In particular, he reassembled the early Italian works collected by Giampietro Campana (1808–80), which the curators of the Louvre had dispersed to remote museums throughout France to demonstrate their political opposition to Napoleon III, who had purchased the collection. These primitives now form the core collection of the Musée du Petit Palais, Avignon. During the 1956 exhibition Laclotte encountered Roberto Longhi (1890–1970), who became his master, together with Charles Sterling and André Chastel.<sup>1</sup> A member of the editorial board of *Paragone* since 1961, Laclotte became friends with many art historians of his generation in England (including Anthony Blunt), the United States and especially Italy; among these was Enrico Castelnuovo (1929–2014), one of his closest friends.

Laclotte organised some of the most important exhibitions of the time, including *The Age of Louis XIV* at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in 1958, and *Treasures of Spanish Painting: Churches and Museums of France* at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, in 1963, as well as a long series in different locations in Paris – *The European Sixteenth Century* at the Petit Palais (1966), *German Painting in the Age of Romanticism* at the Orangerie (1976–77) and *The Golden Age of Danish Painting* (1984) and *The Century of Titian* (1993), both at the Grand Palais. These made Paris one of the meeting places for art historians from around the world. Laclotte

also organised exhibitions devoted to individual works in the Louvre, such as Ingres's *Turkish bath* and Courbet's *L'Atelier*, which provided an opportunity to study a famous painting in all its aspects.

Laclotte loved contemporary art. He was a friend of Pierre Soulages, whom he asked for advice on the choice of colours for the rooms in the Louvre. One of his last outings, on 8th December 2019, was to the Louvre's Salon Carré, the room of the Italian primitives, to see an exhibition staged there to celebrate Soulages's centenary. After his retirement, Laclotte devoted himself to the creation of the Institut national d'histoire de l'Art (INHA) and to the creation of the great art history library that France lacked, now in the Institute's magnificent Salle Labrousse, rue de Richelieu, a project of which he had dreamed all his life.

Laclotte was a Breton: stubborn, secretive, smiling, he did not give himself away much; he was pragmatic in spirit. His favourite occupation was to hang a museum room in a way that would bring out the best qualities of the works. The purchase he was most proud of was the portrait of Sigismund Malatesta by Piero della Francesca, which he bought for the Louvre in 1978. His humour was tinted with affectionate irony. He knew how to surround himself with the best, and up to his death he wanted to train specialists in Italian primitives. For Laclotte, the ability to make attributions was essential. His writings were mainly devoted to the French and Italian primitives but they also included *Histoires de musées: Souvenirs d'un conservateur* – the last word is important – published in 2003 (with an English edition in 2011). A curator's breviary, this unique and fascinating history of French museums in the last quarter of the twentieth century is essential reading for all those who believe in this institution, often disparaged today. Laclotte loved opera, Italian opera above all – he asked for the Trio of Masks from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* to be played at his funeral. He is buried in the cemetery of Plougrescant in deepest Brittany alongside his parents.

<sup>1</sup> See M. Laclotte: 'Obituary: Charles Sterling', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 133 (1991), p.252.

## Arnout Balis (1952–2021)

The Editor-in-Chief of the *Corpus Rubenianum* and the driving force in steering that great project towards completion, Arnout Balis had a particular interest in the depiction of the natural world, especially animals, and in the way that Rubens's workshop operated. Generous in offering help and encouragement to generations of scholars, he himself pursued the difficult problem of Rubens's lost 'theoretical notebook' for the *Corpus*.

by ELIZABETH MCGRATH

**T**HE UNEXPECTED DEATH of Arnout Balis on 6th September at the age of sixty-nine leaves Rubens scholarship bereft. This is not simply because publication of Arnout's unfinished projects, in particular his intensive study of Rubens's theoretical writings, has been so eagerly awaited. The fact is that this unpretentious, acutely perceptive and unfailingly generous man was not only the Editor-in-Chief and driving force of the *Corpus Rubenianum* in Antwerp, but adviser, mentor and friend to virtually all, expert and beginner alike, who wanted to research the work of Rubens and his contemporaries.

Arnout began his studies of art history at the University of Ghent (1970–74) and under the supervision of Roger d'Hulst specialised in Flemish painting of the early modern period. His master's thesis on the so-called *Hunts of Maximilian*, the tapestry series designed by Barend van Orley in the early 1530s, was an impressive analysis of the design, production, subject-matter and context of that magnificent work, clarifying many details about patronage and function. The thesis became the basis of an important article in *Gentse Bijdragen* (1979–80), which focused on the sources of the iconography, and its findings were