

# H-Net Reviews

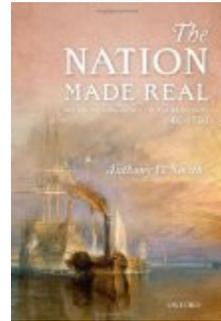
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anthony D. Smith. *The Nation Made Real: Art and National Identity in Western Europe, 1600-1850*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 213 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-966297-5.

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## Visual Arts and the Concept of Nation

The jacket illustration of Anthony D. Smith's *The Nation Made Real: Art and National Identity in Western Europe, 1600-1850* serves as a leitmotif to his quest for national pride: it depicts Joseph M. W. Turner's famous painting *The Fighting Téméraire* (1839), in which the artist muses about the passing of old ways as he shows the ship being tugged to her last berth, underscoring the ideal of self-sacrifice giving way to a new, modern identity.

*The Nation Made Real* is an intellectual history of visual arts that improves our understanding of nationalism, state building, and national identity in western Europe. Author Anthony D. Smith is emeritus professor of nationalism and ethnicity at the London School of Economics, whose distinguished career has included a stint as president of the Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism. This work most definitely benefits from his long experience and practice as an academic immersed in the study of nationalism in the United Kingdom.

The book begins by stressing the role of two kinds of visual arts, painting and sculpture, in the rise of nationalism and national identity, which serves as a central premise for the entire work. Smith argues that artists, painters, and sculptors brought up, in their own unique and diverse ways—whether through depiction of allegories, national landscapes, commemoration, or a heroic past emulated from the antiquity—a common idea that signified the building of modern Europe. The work describes a number of paintings—from Rembrandt's *The*

*Night Watch* (1642) to Jean-Dominique-Auguste Ingres' *Joan of Arc at the Coronation of Charles VII* (1854)—though the goal is not a comprehensive history of the visual arts and their achievements or failures. Instead, Smith's aim is to compare and contrast the evolution of an idea, “nationalism,” which corresponds to western European nation building.

Smith's narrative spans begins in the early seventeenth century with the Dutch struggle for independence during the Eighty Years' War (1568-1648) but primarily focuses on the mid-eighteenth and first quarter of the nineteenth century in France and Britain. The author shows how in an early version of nationalism, the eighteenth-century British took pride in establishing Protestantism and preserved their rich heritage by addressing various aspects of their history, which was by and large inspired by the Homeric past or ancient Rome. In 1789, the French Revolution proclaimed that common identity—and the notion of a nation—could be based on the rule of law and, once again, artists sought examples from the virtuous past of ancient republics to promote the ideals of justice and sacrifice. Further, Smith shows that by the early nineteenth century some other major components of nationalism, developed over the centuries, had appeared anew: pride in military conquest, the revival of revolutionary enthusiasm, and celebrations of glorious deaths—and, once again, visual artists such as Antoine-Jean Gros (*Napoleon on the Battlefield of Eylau*, 1808), Eugène Delacroix (*Liberty Guiding the People*, 1830), and Benjamin West (*The Death of Lord Nelson*, 1806)

played an important role in promoting their nation's cultural heritage by depicting famous historical events.

But on the other hand, what connection might one find between depictions of scenes from Greek or Roman antiquity and the idea of nation and nation building? Smith answers this question by suggesting that mostly "educated classes saw in classical city-states ... models of patriotism" which should guide their present-day lives rather than making them to look back (pp. 112-113). This is the core of Smith's work because it makes various French, British, Italian, and Dutch paintings come alive and show a true and timeless representation of what historical events signify to individuals who were brought up as students and admirers of classical antiquity in their eternal quest for national pride, membership, and identity.

At no point did the idea of nationalism develop more widely than during the War of Liberation in Germany against French (and, at some point, Austrian) dominance during the last stage of the Napoleonic Wars in 1813. There, the German *volk* and medieval occultism, along with the philosophy of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), would soon meet the romantic ideas expressed on the canvas by Caspar Friedrich (1774-1840). However, despite the handsome amount of analysis of this famous German landscapes painter, Smith does not seem to connect either the 1810s or the popular German uprising in the spring of 1848—two major precursors—to the future unification of Germany. Instead, Smith compares Friedrich to another contemporary landscaper—the British painter John Constable (1776-1847)—and argues that Constable's response to nature was less subjective than that of Friedrich.

Of particular importance is the development of the concept of national identity, which Smith correctly argues "until the mid-eighteenth century had been confined to political and cultural elites [but] became more widespread among the rising middle class" (p. 147). Unfortunately, such an important notion is not visibly supported by the evidence, for beyond traditional, classical themes derived from the glorious antiquity of Greece and Rome, there were modes of popular artistic expression that are omitted in Smith's work—e.g., travelers' sketches, anti-Napoleonic caricatures by James Gillray (1755/56-1815), along with the work of popular illustrators such as Auguste Raffet (1804-60) of France or British engraver and naturalist Thomas Bewick (1753-1828). Some attention, however brief, to these works would make our understanding of the building of national identity more

complete. The biggest problem, as Smith himself asserts correctly, is the lack of a wide audience for and regular critical commentary on paintings presented to the "educated elite"—which makes determining the reception of the wider public to the idea of national identity practically impossible.

One of the strong points of this book is the number of examples—interspersed in the discussion of various French and British artists, their schools, and their paintings throughout centuries of wars, struggle, and revolutionary turmoil—in which the reader sees how ideas of national identity, along with the search for the "glorious past" or the presentation of a "national landscape," influenced the common perception of each nation's state building.

Thus, the final chapter, "Commemorating the Fallen," is better understood if looked through the prism of national events. *The Death of General Wolfe* by Benjamin West (1770) and Jacques Louis David's *The Death of Marat* (1793) both show, allegedly, self-sacrifice in the name of common good, albeit in different form. The main intent of both artists, as Smith argues, was to show an event of national as well as historical significance (General Wolfe won Canada for Britain, while Jean-Paul Marat, was a leading radical force of the French Revolution). However, neither work depicts the idealization of a "hero" so much as an attempt to introduce virtuous men, whose death should promote national assertion.

The book is most useful for those involved in art history research and teaching, especially the fields of antiquity and classical art of the eighteenth century, and those working in museums and art galleries. The eloquent, rich writing style makes the work potentially valuable, if occasionally challenging, for graduate seminars in Western history and the history of art.

Smith introduces each chapter with a clear statement of its goal, which helps the reader pay attention to its most crucial points; however, he provides summaries for only two out of the six chapters. From an organizational point of view, it is worth noting that the book discusses more than 140 works of art, but includes only nine black-and-white and seven color reproductions.

But overall, despite such minor glitches, *The Nation Made Real* makes a valuable contribution to our understanding and knowledge of how the visual arts in western Europe contributed to the birth of the modern idea of nation.

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