

On Responsible Arts Criticism

The angels look like awkward frogmen paddling clumsily with their hands and feet as if in a desperate underwater rescue attempt.

— Grace Glueck



William Bouguereau, *A Soul Brought to Heaven*, 1878, 71" x 108", Musée de Périgord, Périgueux, France. Photo courtesy Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

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Note: The following letters were written by me regarding an article by Grace Glueck in the *New York Times* on the recent Bouguereau exhibition. (The September 1982 issue of *Aristos* contains an article on Bouguereau by painting adviser Richard Lack. For information regarding the exhibition catalog, written by Louise d'Argencourt in collaboration with Mark Steven Walker, see the June 1984 issue.)

— Louis Torres, Editor and Publisher

January 18, 1985

Editor
Arts and Leisure Section
The New York Times
229 West 43rd Street
New York, NY 10036

To the Editor:

Grace Glueck's frank disdain for the French academic painter Adolphe William Bouguereau ("To Bouguereau, Art Was Strictly 'The Beautiful,'" Jan. 6) is her indisputable prerogative—quite simply, a matter of taste.

As one of the chief art critics for the *New York Times*, however, Miss Glueck owes her readers precision of language and a clarity of perception unclouded by her personal predilections. In her comments on Bouguereau's "A Soul Brought to Heaven" (photograph enclosed), one sees neither.

According to Miss Glueck: "To our jet-age minds, there is something ludicrous about a winged human body lumbering through the air." She not only presumes thereby that all readers share her taste, she describes the painting in terms that are—to anyone familiar with the work (let alone the nuances of the English language)—patently inappropriate. Like most angels, Bouguereau's angels float or soar; they do not lumber.

Most regrettable (especially since the *Times* chose to publish Miss Glueck's review of the major Bouguereau exhibition at the Hartford Atheneum just one week before the show's closing), is that the majority of readers are unlikely ever to see the painting in question and are therefore wholly at the mercy of the reviewer's description. "The angels look like awkward frogmen," Miss Glueck notes, "paddling clumsily with their hands and feet as if in a desperate underwater rescue attempt."

Never mind that the countenance of the angel gazing steadfastly heavenward, and the tranquil repose of the "soul brought to heaven," hardly suggest desperation. How can anyone who observes this painting avoid seeing that the hands of Bouguereau's angels are gently supporting their charge and are therefore not free to "paddle," clumsily or otherwise.

Surely any artist—even Bouguereau—deserves more responsible criticism.

A serene expression and perfect repose [are] visible in the features of the young girl.

— Louise d'Argencourt

In painting, I'm an idealist. For me, art is the beautiful. Why reproduce the ugly in nature?

— William Bouguereau

April 4, 1985

Mr. A. M. Rosenthal
Executive Editor
The New York Times
229 West 43rd Street
New York, N.Y. 10036

Dear Mr. Rosenthal:

Enclosed, for your information, is a copy of a letter and an accompanying photograph I sent to the Editor of the Arts and Leisure Section in January, referring to an article by Grace Glueck on the nineteenth-century French painter Bouguereau. The letter was not printed.

What is of concern to me here is the fact that the Arts and Leisure Section appears never to print readers' letters (although its editor claims to consider them)—a practice which has the effect of both insulating its critics from the censure of readers and cutting off an important forum for the public exchange of ideas and information.

The *Times* editors, reporters, and columnists who write on politics, economics, and the general culture may be corrected or called to task, when need be, in the letters section of the paper's daily editorial page. Why should those who write on the arts be any less subject to readers' criticism? One can only infer that the editors of the *Times* consider the arts either less important than other aspects of our culture or more esoteric and therefore the sole purview of an elite class of professional interpreters.

I find either premise unacceptable, and I urge the *Times* to institute a regular letters department in the Arts and Leisure Section.