4 The Untimely Classicism of Hans von Marées

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This, precisely, is the proposition the reader is invited to meditate upon: the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture.

Friedrich Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations

Of course modernist painters are always producing the problem of when and how to finish — the problem is modernism's lifeblood, and eventually its deathknell.

T.J. Clark, Farewell to an Idea

Writing about his travels in the Bay of Naples, Henry James formulated a double-edged definition of the late-nineteenth-century northern European fascination with Italy and its tradition. Perpetually inspiring to artist and visitor alike, Italy was, James claimed, also overwhelming, even stifling, to any creative act. It was in equal measure welcoming and hostile to northern European modes of thought and representation. Writing about 'the classic, synthetic directness of the German passion for Italy,' James described the region's peculiar commingling of past and present, attraction and horror, as follows:

The beauty and the poetry, at all events, were clear enough, and the extraordinary uplifted distinction; but where, in all this, it may be asked, was the element of horror that I have spoken of as sensible? — what obsession that was not charming could find a place in that splendid light, out of which the long summer squeezes every secret and shadow? I'm afraid I'm driven to plead that these evils were exactly in one's imagination, a predestined victim always of the cruel, the fatal historic sense. To make so much distinction, how much history had been needed! — so that the whole air still throbbed and ached with it, as with an accumulation of ghosts to whom the very climate was pitiless, condemning them to blanch forever in the general glare and grandeur, offering them no dusky northern nook, no place at the friendly fireside, no shelter of legend or song.

For James, these two sentiments in tandem — one life-affirming, the other thanatonic — constituted the fascination of Italy. As he and later Thomas Mann would have it, the former was not to be had in Italy without the latter. In the second half of the nineteenth century, many artists and visitors felt the suffocating presence of history ahead of its inspirational qualities. How does this morbidity and cultural pessimism, if we can call it such, make its presence felt within a nineteenth-century version of classical form? How do timeliness and timelessness, contemporaneity and a sense of past write their contrary impulses into the making of a modernist artwork inspired by Italy? Such questions lie at the heart of what kept Italy fascinating for a whole range of artists during the rise of the painting of modern life in northern Europe.

The German painter Hans von Marées, who spent more of his life working in Italy than Germany, is certainly one of the best examples of the late-nineteenth-century fascination with Italy. He desperately tried to find through a new classicism a response to French modernist and German nationalist art, and painted, over and over again, nude bodies resting and interacting in an Arcadian landscape. But despite Arcadia's iconographic promise of equilibrium and stasis, Marées's paintings were perpetually unfinished and, according to his own testimony, never achieved the artistic expectations and aspirations he himself had set. Generations of artists and art historians since have agreed that the products of his brush are often painterly failures, convoluted canvases born of a never-ending reworking process that at times took decades. He consistently sought, hesitantly and even obsessively, to forstall the moment of his paintings' completion. Most of his works hover on the brink of material and representational collapse: darkened and heavily cracked, they began to decay almost immediately after Marées abandoned them. His surfaces are endlessly built up, even an inch thick on occasion, and — not unlike James's Neapolitan air palpitating with history — filled with pictorial echoes of that which came before. The belaboured creation of his paintings is unflinchingly
present in every move of the brush, in every gesture of their figures, in every aspect of their seemingly idyllic settings and compositions. Marées’s paintings are thus not really incomplete or unfinished, but over-finished, with the extended durée of their tortured making visible on their surfaces. In their multiple, thick layers of paint, they chronicle an unusually wrenching artistic struggle.

This essay will examine the social and aesthetic valences of the problem of finish in Marées’s oeuvre, in both its constructive as well as destructive aspects. Un-finish is constructive within Marées’s project, as it quarrels with and renders temporal an ahistorical classical vision. But for Marées, a constant state of un-finish was also constructive, keeping alive an iconography not usually open to the particularity of everyday life. Iconography and technique had, for Marées, become separated, yet remained deeply responsive to one another, so much so that the fraught conjunction of Arcadia with Marées’s overworked surfaces could only produce a sense of failure. Marées set himself the task to answer the question of how to keep the classical vision alive for the present, giving its claims to timelessness forms useful and negotiable for the here and now. The choice was between a dead Arcadia or a living one, a classicism able to acknowledge change or not. Marées sought to individualize, localize, and to some extent even gender and eroticize, the generality of Arcadia and classicism. Here, Marées’s fascination with Italy is central for understanding how much contemporary history and politics (including, say, of Italy’s unification) his work was willing and able to incorporate.

Much hinges, to be sure, on how we understand Marées’s classicism, whether the classical for Marées was a fully stable category and averse to change, or able to accommodate a more modern understanding of the nature of reality as contingent. The term ‘classical’ was brought to bear on his art from early on, and used to define that which made Marées different from those modernist painters seeking modern life subjects. Marées’s bodies, faces, landscapes, gestures, and actions sought, it is said, not contemporaneity, but timelessness. At first glance, his scenes seem to have no traces of the industrial or the tourist age, no modern strictures or erotic charge in the representation of the naked body. Marées’s paintings seem to have dreamed themselves back into a classical past, in the belief that here his painting could best escape the horrors of modernity, of capitalism and its destruction of an ancient vision of communal life. This definition of classicism is deeply hostile to modernity, and precisely for this reason, Italy was its chief fascination.

But Marées’s outlook on what he perceived to be classical in fact had much in common with Henry James’s version of Italy, and was much haunted by mixtures of past and present, of stability and flux. Note that Marées’s classicism comes along, indeed could only come along, after modernity has done its work, and not before. Form, subject, and meaning seem to have been risked, and that risk welcomed, by a classicism trying to visualize an Arcadia in which life is not entirely separated from liveliness. As literary historian Frank Kermode put it:

The doctrine of the classic as model and criterion entails, in some form, the assumption that the ancient can be more or less immediately relevant and available, in a sense contemporaneous with the modern – or anyway that its nature is such that it can, by strategies of accommodation, be made so. When this assumption is rejected the whole authority of the classic as model is being challenged, and then we have – whether in Alexandria or in twelfth- or seventeenth- or nineteenth- or twentieth-century Europe – the recurrent quarrel between ancient and modern.4

The relevance of the classical for the modern seems to have been a particularly pointed issue for men like Winckelmann, von Marées, James, and Mann, who projected onto the classical past a vision of a same-sex erotic utopia notably lacking in contemporary life. For these men, the classical world and the dead hand of history carried, paradoxically, poignant liberating possibilities as well. Thus, their engagement with the past offered something of the urgency and passion of an emotional, not intellectual bond, a proto-politics of pleasure. When Marées left a classical picture unfinished, he did so in part to keep the conversation with the past alive, to resolutely refuse to make the past past, to enable a continued engagement with a source of passionate potential in his life. Here the open-endedness of his process is a kind of invitation to dream; to finish a utopia is to recognize it as such.

Born in 1837, Hans von Marées received his artistic training in the military and history painter Carl Steffeck’s Berlin studio in the 1850s. Marées then spent most of his professional life in Italy – in Florence, Rome, and Naples – with few extended stays in Germany. Initially, the Munich art collector Baron von Schack employed him as a copyist. Soon dissatisfied with copying, Marées broke free from his commitments to Schack. In 1866 he met Conrad Fiedler in Rome, where the German philanthropist and art theorist agreed to support Marées for the rest of
his life with a yearly stipend large enough to cover all his expenses. Though their friendship grew strained during the 1870s and 1880s, Fiedler continued his support until Marées's unexpected death in 1887 at not quite fifty years of age. By freeing the painter from the burden of participating in the art market and from 'finishing' his paintings, Fiedler partly allowed him to live out an exceptional artistic identity. Although Marées continuously promised completed works, he also frequently misled Fiedler with empty promises. In part, Fiedler's uncompromising support for Marées was due to the fact that the painter seemed to come closest to the philanthropist and aesthetic theorist's own thought on the artwork as its own contingent reality, which he propounded in several essays published during the 1870s and 1880s. Fiedler and a small circle of mostly German artists and literati were certainly the main, private, if not the only, audience that Marées's paintings then received, although so many of them were made in large-scale public formats. Of the intended spaces and exhibition venues for Marées's creations we know little to nothing, except that Marées would have given them to Fiedler had he felt they were finished. Thanks to Fiedler's relentless promotion after the artist's death - Marées's work had never been publicly exhibited before he died - the painter's reputation quickly grew in stature. In 1891 Fiedler donated the bulk of his works to the city of Munich, and in the space of ensuing publications and exhibitions, Marées was nominated one of the leading figures of German modernism, especially in the installation of his paintings at the 1906 Deutscher Jahrhunderthaussilung in Berlin. By the early 1900s it became a commonplace to regard Marées as the closest German equivalent of Cézanne in France and as rivalling the modern French painters. It was also due to Fiedler, who first publicly called Marées an artistic failure, that, alongside the general worship, Marées was never fully able to shake off the romantic image of an aesthetic seeker whose art bespoke doubt and that peculiarly romantic vision of ambitious, high-toned pessimism.

Hans von Marées, to say the least, has always held a conflicted position within art history in Germany, hovering between early modern genius and artistic failure. And although noted with curiosity and fascination by Richard Brettell in his recent Modern Art, 1851-1929, Marées has otherwise completely escaped Anglo-American art historical attention, unlike Adolph von Menzel. Some of the reasons for this oversight are simple: due to Marées's aesthetic struggles, resulting in the sheer accumulation of unruly matter on his surfaces, most of his major works can never travel from their permanent home at the Neue Pinakothek in Munich. Only here, where almost all of Marées's important works are grouped in one hauntingly somber, unparalleled ensemble, can the depth of Marées's achievement be appreciated. Some of the other reasons for Marées's outsider position are more complicated. They have to do with the fact that our story of the rise of modernism in Western Europe simply cannot account for the doubt writ large on the surfaces of Marées's work. Except perhaps for Paul Cézanne's heavy contours and some of his bitter late struggles with portraiture (of his gardener Vallier in particular) whose function and position in modern painting are no less open for debate, we lack a convincing account of the unruly aspects of matter roaming freely and uncontrollably over the surfaces of paintings such as Marées's.

Marées appears therefore to have been another Frenhofer, the main character of Balzac's The Unknown Masterpiece, or another Claude Lantier, in Zola's L'Oeuvre. Paint accumulates, wrinkles, and cracks on Marées's works, contours blur, and his paintings attract their own undoing. The legs of the male figure on the left in his Praise of Modesty (ca. 1879-85) stick out in their painterly convulsions like the legs in Frenhofer's otherwise illegible attempt at representation (figure 4.1). In most late-nineteenth-century avant-garde painting, every mark of the brush had to be precise, simple, and exact - not complex, multiple, and merging incoherently with its neighbours. Marées's angst-ridden, maladroit brushiness does not match the painterly surety and low-watt subject matter of Manet's single Asparagus, or even of the Impressionists at large. Marées's paintings do not perform an absolute economy of the brush and the subject - on the contrary, they behave this fiat so often made central to an understanding of the rise of the French avant-garde in the 1860s and 1870s.

We still require a language and an analytical apparatus that can fully take into account and make meaningful the failure and disintegration of form in Marées. How does such an overt painterly indecision operate, how does it produce meanings - about the nature of reality, say - rather than negate them? This is a slightly different question from the ones that have been brought to the problem of form versus content in Marées in the past. Marées scholarship has long been dominated by a formal account, initiated by Fiedler when he proclaimed in his obituary of the painter that Marées was seeking forms 'unconditioned by any kind of subject matter.' Until after the Second World War, many Marées interpretations have maintained the modernist imperative that his choice of subject was nothing but secondary to his quest for autonomous forms.
or that his figures served, first and foremost, to structure his compositions and give them rhythm. Others, assuming a more moderate position, have emphasized the role of the human body and of narrative structures in Marées's painting. They have pointed to the repeated personal and biographical, or religious and mythological, content of many of his paintings. This essay, like recent writings on the painter by Gerd Blum and others, seriously questions that a severedon between form and content in Marées's body of work can be successfully maintained. In this account, far from being separate entities, form and its disintegration pose aesthetic and ideological dilemmas key to the search for the classical body. That the undoing of paint and form was something Marées was ultimately unable to keep at bay, but that he also welcomed this disintegration as an agent of meaning into his work, is precisely the ambivalence that Marées's art invites its viewers to take seriously.

In what ways do notions of un-finish and over-finish operate in Marées's career? The question matters, for a painting's finish and a brush's economy, in a modernist universe, would always be an indicator of the painter's integrity and, by extension, that of his subjects. Marées sometimes reworked a painting between fifty and eighty times, as he himself admitted. Moreover, unlike many other artists who might have reworked their paintings just as often, he did not seek to erase the traces of his corrections. He simply added and added, building his canvases in certain areas to the height of a sculptural relief. In his palimpsestic paintings, succeeding layers of paint do not erase the ones underneath, but play with them, thus fossilizing Marées's indecision and self-doubt. The upper layers of paint are at times so translucent that the ones below peek through, creating an illusion of depth, but also of a painterly process of endless revision. In other parts of his paintings, where paint has accumulated to an extraordinarily high degree, deep wrinkles, crevices, and cracks have opened where paint has dried according to its own uneven logic, bringing too much attention to the paint's presence as material. Take, for instance, one of Marées's most acclaimed works, the Hesperides-Triptych, painted between 1884 and 1887 (figure 4.2). Its three upper panels show gatherings of male and female nudes of all ages in orange groves, picking and holding oranges while posing for the viewer. Consider the deep crack in the chest of the centre left Hesperid in the middle panel: it exposes the countless layers of paint that, under their own weight and pressure, had no choice but to

burst open (figure 4.3). The deep dark line that encircles her body seems to be carved out from layers of paint, pushing them up right and left, leaving the body with a denudation both too literal and too inexact. The putti in the lower framing of the triptych, in contrast, are so flat and painted with such liquid paint that small streams run down the painting's wooden support. Sheer materiality helps to establish the hierarchy of a figure's overall importance within the composition.

To be sure, comparable manoeuvres have always held their place in French modernist painting, in Camille Pissarro's complex layered technique for instance, but in Marées they appear more out of control, more unavoidable than fully intentional. Marées's unusual technique of layering oil and tempera paint, which he employed as a tribute to early Renaissance painters, clearly contributed to the often strange and uncomfortable effects of his surfaces. Marées was clearly inexperienced in this difficult and fairly incalculable technique, and many of his paintings are marked by the results of an uneven drying process, in which the tensions between the dried upper and the moist lower layers produced an unusual amount of wrinkles and cracks. Paint inscribes itself as an autonomous, unruly element into Marées's work, a symptom that his pupil Karl von Pidoll described in his reminiscences published three years after his teacher's death: 'Indeed, the material tends to revenge itself against any painterly carelessness.' Some painters' manuals of Marées's day even warned of the concomitant use of oil and tempera paint, such as Über die Grundsätze der Ölmalerei und das Verfahren der classischen Meister, compiled in 1876 by Heinrich Ludwig, an art historian whose work Marées knew well. Ludwig reminded artists of the complexities in combining water- and oil-based paint. Tempera, according to Ludwig, was hardly useful in creating strong illusions of light and shade, and it darkened quickly, so that a large amount of white was necessary to lighten certain areas. Problems occurred in particular when painting skin, the art historian concluded, an obstacle aggravated by tempera's tendency to dry fast. Marées, who knew such warnings, ignored them, and at least in part must have anticipated the final outcome.

It is equally possible that Marées was merely indifferent to his surfaces' physical appearance. Adolf von Hildebrand, one of his closest friends and pupils, insisted that the painter staked all on his paintings' conception and compositional 'arrangement,' which were always perfectly whole and finished, and that the 'so-called execution would not contribute anything substantial.' Yet, Marées's own words easily be-
lie such argumentation. Even after a long creative process of years, if not decades, Marées felt his paintings to be utterly unfinished. In his letters to his family, patron, and artistic friends, he obsessed about the moment of completion. In 1879 he wrote to Fiedler, doubting that finishing a painting would even be possible: ‘I have caught myself believing that, each time I say this thing is done, I am never more than at the beginning. An artwork is never properly finished.’ A year earlier, he had mentioned to Fiedler that he was producing nothing but ‘unfinished attempts.’ The formulation ‘unfinished attempts’ is a redundancy pointing to the heart of the problem: trying to finish that which by definition would not be the final result. At the same time, and despite the realization of the practically unfinishable nature of his art making, Marées felt himself close to what he was striving for, when he proclaimed to his brother Georg in 1884 that ‘after unspeakable efforts and a thousand hindrances I have finally succeeded. Tomorrow I will finish.’ Needless to add, such a tomorrow would never come. Already in 1880 he believed for a brief period of time that he had ‘completed the epoch of trial.’ And in a letter to Fiedler of 1884 Marées proclaimed—in a distinction similar to the one Charles Baudelaire drew between ‘fait’ and ‘fini’ when describing Corot’s work in his ‘Salon of 1845’: ‘I continue focusing constantly on the main issue, and that is (not to finish) but to complete the painting at hand [my emphasis].’ Finishing here implies the simple act of stopping to paint at the moment where every brushstroke, necessary according to pre-established rules of technical accomplishment, is now in place. Completion, instead, implies more than technical bravura; for a painter to complete a painting, its state of technical finish is not necessarily the prime concern. It implies, rather, the capturing and preservation during the painterly process of the most eloquent unity among pictorial conception, composition, and technical ability.

There is arguably one body of works in Marées’s oeuvre where such a balance of conception and technique has been achieved and where iconographic reference and technical effects are not separate. The fresco cycle at the Stazione Zoologica di Napoli, executed between May and November 1873, has often been rightly considered Marées’s most finished and accomplished body of work and provides a test case as to how much reality, contemporaneity, history, and even politics Marées’s classicizing style can and wants to accommodate (figures 4.4, 4.5, 4.6). Part of this success was, of course, due to technical reasons, as Marées had only eight days of retouches: ‘To paint al fresco ... would today do good to all painters, there is frightful, eternal correction everywhere,’ claimed Hildebrand. The cycle has always been regarded as a mix of a-historicity with specific biographical and regional references. The scenes depict a classicized life of fishermen, as well as a group portrait of the intellectuals involved in the zoological institute, the first aquarium in Europe built in the early 1870s. Two of the main scenes show fishermen at work, departing for or returning from the sea. There is a scene of idyllic garden work and one of leisurely repose. In aggregate, the frescoes seem to suggest a reflection on states of work like starting, finishing, and resting.

This cycle of frescoes is the only case in Marées’s career in which he had to face a certain degree of collaborative and scientific correction, as the room was part of a larger complex of natural history study. Anton Dohrn, who, along with Fiedler, commissioned both Marées and Hildebrand, was one of the leading zoologists of his day, and a student of Ernst Haeckel. After much debate, the sole room singled out for fresco decoration was initially used as a music and entertainment room, dedicated to non-scientific pleasure. It still comes somewhat as a surprise that the final frescoes, covering the upper parts of all four walls, betray so little of their scientific context.

Although Marées mentioned in a letter to Fiedler of 1873 that ‘[t]he subject is completely taken from life,’ the life he meant was certainly not the professional one of the scientists around him, except for the tavern scene on the east wall where his acquaintances have gathered (figure 4.4). Here we see Dohrn himself, seated to the left, hat still in hand as if he had just arrived. Behind him Nikolaus Kleinenberg, another zoologist and student of Haeckel, Charles Grant, an English journalist and writer seated in the middle, and Marées, almost hidden behind the blond Hildebrand to the right. These men were active, publishing scientists at the time Marées and Hildebrand lived with them, but to find traces of their Darwinian work on embryology and evolution or on the fauna and flora of the gulf of Naples in the frescoes themselves seems almost impossible.

The frescoes instead describe a Neapolitan fisherman’s existence, anachronistically depicted in the nude, trapped between routine realism and heroic display. Some pensive faces, some attempts to communicate, interrupt the rhythms of work (figure 4.5). These scenes are meant to read as topographically specific—had there been any contemporary recognition of the work before the start of the twentieth century.
viewers would have certainly been able to recognize the cliffs and orange groves of nearby Sorrento early on. The group of scientists and artists, looking over to the fishermen with all the social and class distance that this look implies, were nonetheless taking part in Neapolitan everyday life. The owner of the inn at the Palazzo Donn'Anna, where they used to gather, joins them on the steps; and a poor fish vendor – inspired by Titian’s *Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple* – has spread out her meagre catch in the right corner. Despite the local colour, there is an air of isolation or remove in the immediate environment of these men – there is no Italian scientist or cultural critic among them. In fact Marées, in his entire correspondence, never wrote to a single Italian artist, intellectual, or friend; indeed, he hardly ever mentioned one and instead remained entirely entrenched in Fiedler’s and Hildebrand’s cultural circles in Germany. Charles Darwin and Karl Ernst von Baer, an early German embryologist, appear as busts set into the frescoes, the only emblems of the natural historical function of the building. But these are Hildebrand’s busts, not Marées’s, left to do that job. Marées’s and Hildebrand’s frescoes are trying, desperately, to keep the Italy where they lived, the modern Italy, out of the picture; the native figures do not seem to resemble the Neapolitan fishermen and orange pickers of Marées’s day. And still, Marées thought that his subjects were ‘completely taken from life’ – but an Italian life lived as if modernity had not happened, nor ever would.

What was at stake, of course, was the loss of the utopia that was Italy and an acknowledgment of the processes of modernization. Marées seemed to betray a truly German desire, from Winckelmann and Goethe on, to keep Italy safeguarded from modernity – even Jacob Burckhardt called Italy ‘modemitätsmüde’ (too tired to modernize) and a ‘stilles wunderbares Grabmonument’ (quiet wonderful grave monument). Marées’s is a desperate vision of an unspoiled Italy, a vision entirely born of modernization. But his work spoke too deeply of its motive force, and its fetishization of the surface trapped time and its corporealization in an unstable social world. In Marées’s art, a peaceful gathering of nudes was no longer an expression of a truly harmonious form of community, but was ridden with desire, eroticism, and the failure to communicate. The alienating forces of modern experience have, in Marées’s work, fully entered Arcadia and transformed it.

Through his permanent refuge in Italy, it might seem that Marées tried to escape German history entirely at a time when most of his fellow countrymen celebrated their national unification and military strength. The ‘philistines,’ to use the term Nietzsche flaunted again and again in the face of the newly founded German Kaiserreich in the early 1870s, were most satisfied with the new state of things, not interested in change. Marées’s paintings of the 1870s and 1880s can easily be read as counterweights to such celebratory cultural monuments as the Berlin Victory Column, inaugurated in 1874 and decorated with a historical and allegorical mosaic frieze by the Prussian court painter Anton von Werner. Nothing of that is found in Marées, it would seem, no instrumentalized classicism codified to contemporary Germany and its newfound glory. His paintings – at least in their subject matter – deliberately evoked a realm outside of history, and Italy offered, not specifically, but ideologically, the perfect background. For most of Marées’s career, his works never speak of a specific modernity or a specific history.

Italy, in the 1870s and 1880s, was the place for Germans where such escapism was still possible, even traditional. Yet, Italy’s own national development was deeply entangled in the process of German unification, on which its own political future depended. In 1870 German and Italian efforts at unification were established in mutual assistance at the same moment in history. Rome, the last Italian bastion in French hands, was finally taken by the Italian army in 1870 when Napoleon III had to withdraw his army from Italy for use in the Franco-Prussian War. France’s declaration of war against Prussia was therefore one of the leading causes for the final founding of the unified Italian nation. The members of the intellectual circle of the Stazione were certainly aware of these facts and their political resonance. They frequently read and communicated with German cultural and political critics and historians like Ferdinand Gregorovius or Heinrich von Treitschke, who, in his famous study on Camillo Cavour, advocated a parallel between the German and Italian national unifications. Such a line of argument had become popular since the early 1860s, intensified during the Prussian-Austrian disagreement over Italy in 1866, and reached its pinnacle in 1870/1. Italy’s and Germany’s new-found yet age-old national brotherhood – the two were frequently called ‘old hostile sisters’ in the press – was described by Gregorovius as follows: ‘As both great nations had, for centuries, faced a similar misfortune, they both arose, at the same time, to full freedom and unity. They helped each other up, the one aiding the other, in the bitter battle for their national renewal. After
1870/1, one country's historical fate was inevitably and consequentially linked to that of the other. But as a result, Germany had to renegotiate its image of Italy, acknowledging it as a contemporary political entity. Tellingly, Marées left for Italy, almost permanently, in the early 1870s.

This history was meaningful and important to German expatriates in Italy in the years after 1871, and especially to Marées, who was himself a soldier in the Prussian army during the war stationed in Cologne. His brother had been severely wounded in battle. When Marées modelled the two women in the orange grove on the south wall so clearly after Johann Friedrich Overbeck's famous 1828 painting Italien and Germanien, he could not have been unaware of the new resonance of this painting for his own political moment (figure 4.7). If these are Italia and Germania in intimate conversation in Marées's fresco (figure 4.6) - one blond, one dark-haired, in an embrace similar to that in Overbeck's painting - then these figures speak to the recent development in German and Italian political relations. The union between the two national allegories suggests that this union is necessary to provide a potential for a new Arcadia and a new classicism, one engendered by Germans and Germany for Italy. The frescoes' harmonious, classicizing vision of the rural working class could only have been made possible, Italia and Germania suggest, because the two nations are now linked - Germany's unification process enabling Italy's and bringing it to a close. This, then, was Marées's challenge: to find expression for the pull between the new shifting historical conditions and the dream of an ancient immutable stability that led to Italy in the first place. Trying to speak political specificity and immutability is the trap that Marées's modern classicism ran into, or the task it set itself to resolve.

As Manfredo Tafuri has argued, the 'disintegration of the concept of form corresponded to the formation of a new metropolitan universe, located in Paris and elsewhere.' Yet, for Marées, paradoxically, disintegration of form was a staple ingredient of classicism in marked opposition to metropolitan modernism. Marées confessed in a letter some years after the frescoes' completion that he wanted to remove one fresco, which he, fortunately, never did. There has been speculation about which one - he did not specify - ever since. Maybe he meant the two women, since their Arcadian setting and romantic idyllism could too easily be assimilated to a political reading that the entire cycle worked to forestall. But this episode shows just how difficult it had become, by the early 1870s, to paint parts of Europe as if untouched by history and political change - because they were not, nor could have been.

To be sure, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, the question of a painting's finish had emerged as one of the hot-button issues of the day, and the line between sketch and painting was anything but firmly drawn. Still, Marées, as an artist torn so completely between the two camps, remains a unique figure within nineteenth-century art. Marées felt the tension between his hopes for completion and his realization that his aesthetic practice could not allow for a finished product. In fact, he exploded, willingly or not, the categories of finish as such. 'Always at the right moment, someone should take my pictures away from me.' The surfaces of Marées's paintings seem to testify to a lack of the restraint and confidence necessary to discipline his material. Shortly after Marées's death, many writers took the unfinishedness as a sign of more than just technical difficulty and, lending an ethical dimension to the debate, declared the artist lacking in will and moral strength. To them, he was the 'willing, struggling type of artist who would never reach his greatest promise and fulfillment.' Such statements also imply that his will was not firm enough to ensure painterly success. And according to Karl von Pidoll, another of Marées's zealous students, it was not just his will that was not secure enough for the difficulties of his profession, but its very source, his masculinity: 'As noble as his instrument was, it was as difficult for him to learn to use it. It did not suit him in his undertaking to make use of his entire manhood with all its physical, spiritual, and moral forces.'

Marées, in his constant search for finish, is understood as either a mere searcher unable to find or a fighter unable to win - a process he himself called his 'Don Quixote.' He undoubtedly had the highest and most rigid moral expectations of his artistic identity, to live by the highest codes of honourability and integrity. He had equally high expectations of his masculine identity, so high, in fact, that the norm he envisioned for himself was far beyond his reach and thus left him constantly tormented. He was, in short, a man striving for a proper blend of masculine normativity and artistic control - and failing: 'It remains most desirable at the end of one's career, to know that one has fulfilled one's task as a man... A self-sufficient artist can only be a man who has dominated over all prejudices.'

The fraught relationship between masculinity and finish was emblazoned by a vision of masculinity forestalled. This aesthetic adoles-
cence was not just centrally thematized in Marées's painting, but was also a common trope within the writings of Marées's and especially Fiedler's Leipzig literary circle. In fact, in several short stories, we find main characters that echo Marées's own existential and artistic struggles. In Max von Schlegel's 'Torso,' a short artist's novel published in 1873 in Der Salon für Literatur, Kunst und Gesellschaft, the protagonist, Robert Pfeil, is an unsuccessful, thinly talented young artist called 'Torso,' because he cannot finish his paintings: "You call me Torso jokingly because I can't finish anything... Ideas, which threw me into a true ecstasy of creation, exploded underneath my fingers towards formlessness and monstrosity, or shrank into a shadowy grimace."46 Despite his professional difficulties, Torso is nevertheless considered a very moral character. Unable to watch the love of his youth grow more and more unhappy in her marriage to an old wealthy banker, Torso makes her publicly and in front of her husband—face her unhappiness, though not entirely selflessly. Her divorce is—according to the author—the only morally justifiable decision, and Torso is credited with bringing it about. After marrying her himself and confirming his moral strength, Torso writes a book, is finally productive and turns into a 'complete' man: 'And here, we would like to end—since Torso died with the emergence of his creativity—Robert Pfeil, lives on as a complete, enviable man [my emphasis].47

Another literary character who thought himself 'incomplete' is Fridolin, the main character in Adolf Wilbrandt's 1875 novel Fridolin's Mystical Marriage. In a conversation with his former student Leopold on the topic of marriage, Fridolin admits that he is already secretly married to his 'inner' female half. During the course of the novel, the art historian and philanthropist Fridolin falls in love with both men and women—first with the niece of his housekeeper, Ottilie, and later with her brother Ferdinand, whom he calls 'Ottilius.' But, as Fridolin explains, he will never have a satisfying relationship, since his second half—the one momentarily not in love—steps back into his conscience and intervenes. Always already internally married, yet always looking for a real-life partner, he is destined to fail, despite the fact that he has attained the highest level of civil achievement and a secure public post: 'Fridolin sighed with whimsical sentimentality. "While I, at forty, am not my own physician, have not finished my moral training, and have not mastered my profession! I am utterly incomplete—incapable of completion."'48

Thus, there seems to be a then current equation between the success-

ful development of a masculine and moral self and the ability to finish or complete professional obligations. Marées seems to have believed, along with some of his contemporaries, that he was not morally equipped, which is to say not man enough, to finish his work. Yet at the same time, Marées seems to have carried this defining crisis to such extremity as to unmask the ideological equivalence among morality, manliness, and the ability to finish.

In this moralizing universe, a painting's finish, finally, had ethical and sexual consequences and evoked existential fears beyond the reach of an artist's brush. No painterly fantasies that sought what Marées sought—not a fossilized but a living, breathing Arcadia—would be able to show the masculine artistic self under pressure from the destabilizing forces of life and its desires that these same fantasies unleashed. To paint an animated Arcadia thus required a firm manhood that the very aspiration to it foreclosed. Yet un-finish was also in some form or other a guarantee that this Arcadia would remain alive, evolving in the present. The price to pay for such a Mephistophelean bargain was self-doubt, born of a loss of control over the artist's materials and, concomitantly, his manliness.

Marées's whole career courted destabilization under the pressure of a need to complete, a will to complete, a not-being-able-to-complete, and a not-wanting-to-complete, which his critics sensed early on. The uneven surfaces of Marées's paintings, 'ruinous' as they were often called, played heavily into the hands of these critics and into the rhetoric of unfinishedness surrounding Marées's work shortly after his death. Paint supposedly rested on his canvases like 'cushions,' applied by a 'trowel.'49 Adolf von Hildebrand drafted the following devastating verdict about Marées's abilities in an 1885 letter to Fiedler: 'An impossibly hideous technique, his things in horrible condition and saved merely by their decorative effects. Gagged up in effort and despair, gnawed off to the skeleton of a conception.'50 The cracks and wrinkles were perhaps particularly unsettling for early viewers because they affected the human figure most. As Heinrich Ludwig predicted, Marées would have immense difficulty painting skin. His bodies, like those in the Hesperides protruding from their surroundings, are built up much higher than the rest of the image, a sign that the human form was of particular importance to Marées, but that it also produced notably more painterly anxiety. Marées, in his early critics' eyes, painted amidst seemingly classical, stable, and timeless landscapes—a humanity that was visually scarred and decrepit. Despite the Elysian fields, a green shade of skin, a com-
plexion of sickness, and the signs of aging make their round in Arcadia. And solid flesh appears as mere projection or shadow, held together not by signs of its materiality, but by effects on the bodies’ surfaces. Heinrich Wölfflin, who wrote a brief essay on Marées in 1891, described this discrepancy between idyll and sickness as follows:

What was striking here is the following: the most genuine beauty was paired with laughable deformity; the most magnificent movements, but the limbs here and there completely stunted; deep, saturated colours in the background that resign all effects to the glowing bodies, but the bodies themselves painted over again and again in a morbid manner so that whole cushions of paint rested on single parts and attracted all attention in an untoward manner.51

Such a feeling of morbidity in Arcadia extended far beyond Marées’s technical inconsistencies. As Wölfflin intimates, movements, interactions, gestures, and even whole compositions were equally affected. Observe not just the deep crack in the left Hesperid’s chest, but try to decipher the strange gestures of her companions. They are offering fruit and breasts at once, raising arms, extending hands to no particular avail—addressing no one, directly, inside or outside the painting’s visual field. There is no narrative cohesion to this scene, or to this triptych, just an uncertainty about what there might be to convey. Similarly, in Marées’s The Golden Age II, painted between 1880 and 1883, we see a gathering of male and female nudes in an Arcadian landscape (figure 4.8). There seems to be hardly any narrative structure to this allegorical painting, no communication between the protagonists, just some shyly exchanged glances and gestures. Bodies are too composed, hips and shoulders too bent, to bespeak naturalness and comfort. The naked body is merely put on display here, in its canonical and erotic dimensions.

Yet, this is a largely empty eroticism, expurgated and distanced from what we know as the workings of human desire, though not completely: beyond the erotic platter including offerings of breasts as fruit, there are even naked bodies conjoined, yet unresponsive, genitals to an equal degree exposed and covered, children partaking in the same erotic teasing as their grown-up counterparts.52 This is an Arcadian eros, playful and innocent, distanced from the sweat and odour of the human form, the rawness of desire. But it nonetheless opens onto a prospect of sexual desires unwelcome in other nineteenth-century paint-

ing, desires like homoeroticism.53 (Marées himself has often been said to have had homoerotic inclinations towards his pupils, to say the least, especially toward Adolf Hildebrand. Marées never married and the few times he courted a woman, such as Melanie Tauber, he did so in exceedingly formalized and non-committal terms.) In Marées’s Three Male Youths under Orange Trees of 1875–80, three young, naked men point or even stare at each other’s crotches, while picking fruit or simply resting (figure 4.9). Genitals, again, can be both carefully covered, or fully exposed, gestures and gazes empty or meaningful. Marées is intent on showing us a world innocent enough to stand completely apart from the modern world and the metropolis, yet aware of modernity’s dense investment in erotic and sexual imagery.

The utter composure and strange purposelessness of the naked figure in Marées’s art surely added to the perception that his bodies were ‘classical’ and bereft of incident, but then, in the same measure, also not human. In the words of many critics, his figures showed an antique, ‘classical’ existence, freed from history, vicissitude, the social and personal. At first glance, Marées’s painting seems the perfect ‘Existenzmalerei’ or ‘Existenzbild’—‘painting of existence’—as Jacob Burckhardt called it in his 1855 Cicero when describing Venetian painting like that of Veronese.54 He meant to describe a type of painting that sought the underlying structures of life, not its distracting narrative, incident, or expression. For Fiedler, this quality was Marées’s attempt to achieve an ‘illusion of life.’55 Fiedler meant to suggest an ontological exploration of the essence of existence, the deep structure of all human relation expressed in classical forms of permanent stability. Yet Marées tried for more, if not the impossible: to write the classical in forms that also bespeak a more modern sense of the contingency of reality and desire. But if bodies blur and look strangely uncomfortable, then the paintings’ deep humanism can never be fully successful. The classical landscape and the classical body that Marées set out to recover seem to be in a state of development, like the paint itself, revealing their incomplete construction rather than stable essences. Over- or un-finish supplements Marées’s humanist scenes, constantly haunts the idyll. The supposedly natural state of nakedness in Arcadia reveals its artificiality, because its painful painterly production is left too overtly visible.

A similar contradiction between the processual and the stable nature of the artwork marks Marées’s relation to the aesthetic theories of his patron and mentor Conrad Fiedler. Fiedler’s neo-Kantian aesthetics,
which he propounded in essays written during the 1880s like 'Modern Naturalism and Artistic Truth' and 'The Origin of Artistic Activity,' influenced such important late-nineteenth-century texts as Adolf von Hildebrand's The Problem of Form published in 1893. In his writings, Fiedler proved to be less interested in the final artwork and its interpretation than in its creative process. Analytically, at least, Fiedler always favored the artistic individual and his perceptual capacities over the importance of inspiration or even the final product those faculties had wrought. To be sure, theory and practice never fully cooperate, and a painter’s working methods were far from Fiedler’s preoccupations: an artist’s cognition, not hands, concerned him. On the topic of Fiedler’s influence on Marées, and vice versa, scholars are therefore anything but united, claiming for Marées a residue of mimeticism and illusionism that was foreign to Fiedler’s postulates of art’s autonomy as its own reality. In Fiedler’s early essay ‘On Judging Works of Visual Arts’ of 1876, art is said not to be a reproduction of reality, but reality itself. Art, in this theory of cognition, is a genuine vector of human experience – a self-realizing reality. In that it equals language,’ to quote Gottfried Boehm, who has written extensively and most persuasively about Fiedler. Fiedler himself formulated his proposition most succinctly in ‘Modern Naturalism’:

If, for ages, two major principles – that of the imitation and that of the transformation of reality – have fought over the right to be considered the true expression of the nature of artistic activity, then a settlement of the dispute seems possible only if we replace these principles by a third: the principle of the creation of reality. Because art is one of the primary means by which humanity produces reality.

Fiedler thus concluded, very much in Marées’s spirit, that the artwork could only replicate processes of ‘becoming’ – like nature and reality itself – rather than represent and freeze a completed ‘being’ that existed outside of art. Because nature, life, and reality – as emblems of the world’s contingency – were Fiedler’s models, the artwork was destined to an eternal doing and undoing, ultimately unfinished and as circumstantial as the real:

The realization that our entire possession of sensory reality is limited to events of perception and conception which do not represent a steady condition, but are composed of becoming and disappearing, of growing and dying – this realization leads us to believe that in reality, we perceive not just a fugitive, but also an underdeveloped or atrophying construction.

If our conception of reality is thus defined as one of eternal flux, growth, and development, art, similarly, is rendered a sphere of comparably autonomous, yet unceasing production, not re-production. But what exactly is the work of art, then, and what are its new norms and resistances, if not entirely self-imposed? If art should be nature and not be like nature, then the artwork was also structured by the very principles of reality that governed the world at large and from which even the artwork’s autonomy offered no relief. Marées called this the ‘turmoil of modern jumble.’ Art had to risk its own undoing, lose its boundaries and definitions, for, as Fiedler insisted, reality, any reality, was by necessity changing and in perpetual flux. No wonder Fiedler shied away from establishing more accurately what such an art object would actually look or be like. Marées, paradoxically the artist of the classical past, of Arcadian idyll, became for Fiedler the artist who might – at least at the outset of their partnership – create a painterly response to his understanding of reality as contingency.

If a painting’s state of completion, by extension, cannot even be realized theoretically, it can, in practice, only be deferred ad infinitum and never reached. ‘Failure thus becomes a historical necessity.’ Wölfflin, for instance, found a contradiction in Marées’s work and pointed directly to his necessary failure. On the one hand, he claimed that Marées sought ‘the normal and general. In the composition of his figures, as well as in their movements, he avoided the special, the exceptional.’ On the other, alluding to Marées’s convulsive surfaces, he declared his figures painted in a ‘sickly manner.’ Wölfflin thus evacuated any possible connection Marées might have hoped for between his subjects and his paint handling.

In Marées’s understanding, a possible version of a modern classicism might be one that declared a continuous, autonomous painterly process – art as its own reality and nature – as a substitute for, or correlate to, classicism’s claim to the ‘natural’ body or the ‘natural’ landscape. This new classicism, although Fiedler never called it such, would use a rhetoric of art – in subject matter and technique – as nature, rather than like nature. Unlike Fiedler, who would not venture to make such connections between theme and handling, Marées would continue to hope that the classical could be communicated both through the application
of paint and through Arcadian compositions. He continued to paint the Hesperides, or a Golden Age, and never let go of subject matter altogether. The 'lively' layers of paint on his surfaces were always to some extent autonomous from, yet linked to, what they were seeking to describe and define. Yet, Marées did not seem to fully realize, or was unable to control, the fact that his paint's autonomy was somehow at odds with his subjects. Reality's flux and Arcadia's essence were written in different temporal frames — in Marées's paintings, process and timelessness quelled rather than unite. Nature in Marées's works seems to promise both an underlying essence and an unending process of becoming. But perhaps the point of his art making can best be described as follows: in order to give the classical idiom a modern form, Marées permitted it the contamination of the temporal. But the advent of the temporal in the classical inaugurates its annihilation.

The classic spirit will probably always be crosscut with hopes and aspirations that the classical can, one day, be truly reborn. But it will also bear the utter pessimism that the past is forever lost in the past and that a modern classicism would amount to nothing but an awakening of ghosts better left sleeping. Or even worse: the pleasures of the classical and its pledge of harmony are too premised on containment. As Henry James testified, it was precisely through its double-edged fascination for northern Europeans that Italy offered itself up to a new generation of German cultural pessimists like Thomas Mann and many more. It was a space where the cultural losses of modernity's rise could be all the more keenly felt and therefore all the more theatrically mourned. Italy was beautiful and tragic after all, northern Europe's lure and horror. Classicism, at least in the manner Marées conceived of it, was a modernization of artistic form out to halt modernity in its tracks, yet unsure and internally conflicted as to how much of the modern — and its presentness, change, alienation, and disintegration — it could actually assimilate.

NOTES

In addition to the conference in Toronto that provided the occasion for this anthology, a different version of this paper was presented at the College Art Association annual conference in Chicago on 3 March, and at the University of California, Berkeley, on 13 April 2001. I am grateful not only to Vojtěch Jirat-Wasiutynski and the co-organizers of the Toronto symposium, but also to the audiences at these three events; all their responses have helped to strengthen the arguments of this essay. I would like to thank Andreas Beyer, Whitney Davis, Christiane Groeben, Katherine Kuenzli, Thomas Laqueur, and Monika Wagner for sharing their thoughts on Marées with me and for providing helpful critique to earlier incarnations of the manuscript. In particular, my gratitude belongs to Jonathan D. Katz, without whose continued stimulating conversations on the topics of Marées, Germany, sexuality, and failure, as well as editorial guidance, this essay would not have been possible. All translations from the German are my own.

1 The literature on American and northern European artists in Italy is vast. For recent overviews of the field, see The Lure of Italy: American Artists and the Italian Experience, 1760–1914, ed. T.E. Stebbins, exh. cat., Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, 1992). For a comprehensive study and bibliography on the artistic circle central to this essay, see 'In uns liegt Italien.' Die Kunst der Deutsch-Römer, exh. cat., Haus der Kunst (Munich, 1987–8) and Arnold Böcklin e la cultura artistica in Toscana, Hans von Marées, Adolf von Hildebrand, Max Klinger, Karl Stauffer-Bern, Albert Wels, exh. cat., Palazzina Mangani (Fiesole, 1980).


6 On Fiedler’s philanthropy and his generous support of Marées, see Peter Hirschfeld, Mäzene: Die Rolle des Auftraggebers in der Kunst (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1968), 237–47.

7 Even friends were rarely admitted to Marées’s studio, and critical opinion written during the artist’s lifetime is therefore extremely scarce.


15 This tendency in Marées scholarship is best exemplified by the contributions to the catalogue of the large Marées retrospective of 1987–8 in Munich: Hans von Marées, ed. C. Lenz (Munich, 1987–8).


18 For the most recent, extensive treatment of the Hesperides, see Frank Schmidt, Fresken malen ohne Wunde: Zur Funktion, Genese und Bedeutung der Triptychen Hans von Marées’ (Weimar: VDG, 2003), 25–52.

19 ‘Auch pflegt sich das Material für Übereilungen zu rächen.’ Karl von Pickl, Aus der Werkstatt eines Künstlers: Erinnerungen an den Maler Hans
von Marées aus den Jahren 1880–81 und 1884–85 (Luxembourg: V. Bück, Leo Bück, 1890), 74.


22 'Auf etwas habe ich mich erapt, dass ich jedes Mal, wenn ich von einer Sache sage, sie ist fertig, ich mich eigentlich erst am Anfang befinde. Eigentlich fertig wird ein Kunstwerk nie'; from Rome to Fiedler, 11 June 1879. Marées, *Briefe*, 190; for similar formulations, see 185, 200, 202, and 256.

23 [Meine unfertigen Versuche]; from Rome to Fiedler, 27 July 1878. Ibid., 180.

24 'Nacht unsäglichen Mühen und tausend Hindernissen ist mir dies endlich gelungen. Morgen schliesse ich definitiv ab'; from Rome to his brother Georg, 21 May 1884. Ibid., 274.

25 [Mit der Probirepoche [sic] abgeschlossen]; from Rome to Georg, 27 September 1880. Ibid., 223.


31 Charles Grant's (1841–89) *Stories of Naples and the Camorra* (London: Macmillan) were published in 1896. On Grant, see Alice Sieben's brief biographical postscript in Charles Grant, *Pepinello* (Ulm: Aegis, 1947), 104–6.


36 'Wie beide großen Nationen Jahrhunderte lang ein ähnliches Mißge-


51 'Was auffallend dabei war: die lauterste Schönheit war gepaart mit lächerlicher Mißbildung; die herrlichsten Bewegungen, aber die Glieder teilweise ganz verkümmert; tiefe, satte Farben im Grund, die alle Wirkung den leuchtenden Körpern zuleiteten, die Körper selbst aber in krankhafter Weise so überstrichen und wieder überstrichen, daß ganze Kissen von Farbe auf den einzelnen Teilen lagerten und die Aufmerksamkeit in weicher Weise auf sich zogen'; Wölfli, 'Hans von Marées,' 75. See also Susan R. Anderson-Riedel, 'Heinrich Wölfli, Hans von Marées and the Principles of Art,' Pantheon 57 (1999): 151–60.


55 'Illusion des Lebens'; Fiedler uses this phrase in his obituary of Marées. Fiedler, Hans von Marées, 46.


59. ‘Wenn von alters her zwei große Prinzipien, das der Naturannahmung und das der Umwandlung der Wirklichkeit, um das Recht gestritten haben, der wahre Ausdruck des Wesens der künstlerischen Tätigkeit zu sein, so scheint eine Schlichtung des Streites nur dadurch möglich, daß an die Stelle dieser beiden Prinzipien ein drittes gesetzt wird, das Prinzip der Produktion der Wirklichkeit. Denn nichts anderes ist die Kunst als ein der Mittel, durch die der Mensch allererst die Wirklichkeit gewinnt.’


60. ‘Die Einsicht, daß sich unser gesamter sinnlicher Wirklichkeitsbesitz auf Wahrnehmungs- und Vorstellungsvorkommnisse beschränkt, die nicht einen gleichmäßig dauernden Zustand, sondern ein Kommen und Gehen, ein Entstehen und Verschwinden, ein Werden und Vergehen darstellen – diese Einsicht führt uns dazu, in der Wirklichkeit nicht ein flüchtiges, sondern auch ein vielfach unentwickeltes oder verkümmeretes Gebilde zu erkennen.’

Conrad Fiedler, ‘Der Ursprung der künstlerischen Tätigkeit,’ (1887) ibid., 162. On Fiedler’s further statements on unfinishedness, see his letter to Hildebrand from Munich on 27 December 1882. Jachmann,
Figure 4.1 Hans von Marées, "Hesperides II," ca. 1884–7, mixed media on wood, 113.5 × 115 cm. Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Neue Pinakothek, Munich, inv. 7854a–f.

Figure 4.2 Hans von Marées, "Hesperides II," ca. 1884–7, mixed media on wood, 341 × 482 cm. Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Neue Pinakothek, Munich, inv. 7854a–f.
Figure 4.3 Detail of Figure 4.2, central panel.

Figure 4.4 Hans von Marées, Adolf von Hildebrand, ‘Fresco Room,’ 1873, 13.5 m long, 7.5 m high, 5 m wide, view looking east. Naples, Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn, Historical Archives. Photograph by Luciano Pedicini, 2002.
Figure 4.5  Hans von Marées, Adolf von Hildebrand, 'Fresco Room,' 1873, 350 x 500 cm, west wall. Naples, Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn, Historical Archives. Photograph by Luciano Pedicini, 2002.

Figure 4.6  Hans von Marées, Adolf von Hildebrand, 'Fresco Room,' 1873, 470 x 1350 cm, view towards south wall. Naples, Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn, Historical Archives. Photograph by Luciano Pedicini, 2002.
Figure 4.7 Johann Friedrich Overbeck, Italia and Germàna, 1828, oil on canvas, 94.5 × 104.7 cm. Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Neue Pinakothek, Munich, Inv. WAF 755.

Figure 4.8 Hans von Marées, Golden Age II, ca. 1880-9, mixed media on canvas, 187.4 × 145 cm. Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Neue Pinakothek, Munich, Inv. 7861.
Figure 4.9 Hans von Marées, *Three Male Youths under Orange Trees*, ca. 1875–80, mixed media on wood, 187 × 145 cm. Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Neue Pinakothek, Munich, Inv. 7863.

Modern Art and the Idea of the Mediterranean

Edited by Vojtěch Jiráň-Wasiutyński
with the assistance of Anne Dymond

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London