



Fig. 157 **Charles Gleyre**, *Evening (Lost Illusions)*, Salon of 1843. Oil on canvas, 62½ × 95¼". Louvre, Paris.

blind bard Thamyris from Homer's *Iliad*; and the departing ship as an allegory of the voyage of life is a familiar symbol. But these disparate themes create an introverted, cryptic mood that almost functions as emotional autobiography. Indeed, the painting has been explained as a series of evocative metaphors that allude to the disappointment of Gleyre's own public and private life. (His vision, for example, had been gravely impaired during a trip to Egypt and the Near East with a patron from Boston; and the ship of muses speaks for the artist's unattainable aesthetic ambitions.) In earlier Romantic art, such as James Barry's self-portrait (see fig. 44), erudite classical themes might also be fused with intensely personal references, but here, the large official dimensions and impersonal style are surprising vehicles for goals of emotional self-disclosure. Although Gleyre's gloomy meditation on the transience of art and life may seem a last gasp of the Romantic spirit, it can also be looked at as prophetic of the haunting mysteries of late nineteenth-century Symbolism. More unexpectedly, Gleyre, as a teacher who underlined the importance of broadly painted, preliminary sketches, left his stamp on a group of younger pupils—Monet, Renoir, Bazille, and Sisley. These Impressionists-to-be were ironically to use their master's recommendation of rapid sketches not as a means to the polished, finished ends of official Salon painting, but as ends in themselves that might convey those immediate experiences of the here and now which Gleyre had banned from his repertory of timeless, ideal subject matter.

Another great Salon success of the 1840s, the *Romans of the Decadence* (fig. 158), by Thomas Couture (1815–79), also attempted, though less moodily than Gleyre's *Evening*, to uphold venerable traditions and evoke a hazy range of solemn thoughts. Approaching the imposing dimensions of Wiertz's contemporaneous *Triumph of Christ* (see fig. 152), it preaches a moral lesson while simultaneously depicting an unbuttoned display of sexual and alcoholic license that translates the sensuality of Ingres's and Delacroix's harems into the high-minded language of classical history and Renaissance art. Accompanied in the 1847 Salon catalogue by a quotation from Juvenal that comments on how it was not war that sapped the strength of ancient Rome but rather the vice that was later cultivated in years of peace, Couture's huge canvas (more than twenty-five feet wide) had the appeal of both a weighty philosophical statement and a rich succession of easy references to hallowed masterpieces of painting. Built upon the stable architectural foundations of grandiose symmetry, so familiar to the official art of the mid-nineteenth century, it seems to fuse the worlds of both Raphael's *School of Athens* and Veronese's *Marriage at Cana*, polar opposites in the Renaissance tradition that might represent intellect versus passion, line versus color—in short, the kind of theoretical contrast that forced Ingres and Delacroix into the leaderships of enemy camps. Here, the infiltration of Venetian warmth and sensuality into a Raphaellesque structure almost evokes in itself the feeling that an orgiastic decadence has corrupted

a once noble Roman world. To amplify this generalized sermon on virtue versus vice, Couture has inserted among the columns a sculpture gallery of Roman ancestral figures, with Germanicus in the middle. Like marble ghosts, they chillingly recall the moral probity of the Roman past and, in the case of the statue at the right, even seem to refuse a cup of wine proffered by a living, vice-ridden Roman. Moreover, at the extreme right, a pair of observers, identifiable as members of the alien Germanic civilization that will conquer Rome, seem to be pondering, along with the Salon spectator, this sad decline. With such broad symbolic contrasts, the *Romans of the Decadence*, like *The Raft of the Medusa*, was easily subjected to many metaphorical speculations in which the themes of Latin versus Germanic cultures, contemporary decadence versus ancient uprightness could be freely interpreted in a nineteenth-century context. After the 1848 Revolution, Couture himself would turn to subjects from modern French history, but the sheer size and persistent idealism of the *Romans of the Decadence* gave it an establishment position against which younger generations would have to take a stance. Couture's own French and foreign students could either pursue his official goals, as did Puvis de Chavannes and Feuerbach (see figs. 257 and 258), or reject them, as did Manet. As for the most ambitious and radical artist to emerge after the 1848 Revolution, Gustave Courbet, the *Romans of the Decadence*,

exhibited in 1847 on the eve of the deluge, must have represented the last major fortress to be attacked in his new war of Realism versus Idealism. When, at the Salon of 1850, he exhibited his *Burial at Ornans* (see fig. 228), a vast canvas committed to the coarse but true image of country life in the nineteenth century, he hoped to bury as well what seemed to many the false premises of Couture's monumental tribute to tradition.

The undermining of idealist traditions was by no means so abrupt as the collision of Couture and Courbet before and after 1848 might suggest. Already in the 1830s, Vernet, Lessing, and Delaroche (see figs. 148–50) could present historical, religious, or exotic subjects in a style that seemed more appropriate to photographic documentation than to the lofty abstractions of pure art. Such deflations of the ideal and the pompous accelerated in the 1830s and 1840s, offering a counterpart to the growing power of the middle classes throughout the West. Whether in Jacksonian America, in England after the Reform Bill of 1832, or in France under Louis-Philippe, new reflections of the ordinary, the workaday, the comfortable could be felt. Coined in Germany, the term Biedermeier (originally the name of vulgar lampoon characters in a Munich periodical) has come to refer to a middle-class outlook that pervaded all the arts of the Western world. Vienna, during the age of Metternich, was a perfect mirror of this social



Fig. 158 **Thomas Couture**, *Romans of the Decadence*, Salon of 1847. Oil on canvas, 15' 6½" × 25' 10". Musée d'Orsay, Paris.