

# Pierre-Auguste Cot's *The Storm*

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PIERRE-AUGUSTE COT's *L'Orage* or *The Storm* (Figure 1) has long been regarded, at least by Americans aware of its presence at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, as a symbol of late nineteenth-century French academicism. It is for this reason that the painting itself is far better known than the name of the artist who made it. One of a very few major examples of its genre in a magnificent collection of Realist, Impressionist, and Post-Impressionist works, *The Storm* even to this day attracts a litany of caustic attacks. These are usually made by hindseers convinced of the injustice of late nineteenth-century resistance to the avant-garde. For others, the history of a painter like Cot can simply be dismissed as irrelevant to any purpose and inherently uninteresting. One recent author, John Canaday, although not entirely wrong in having described Cot's main interest for us as an example of an outworn point of view, has even gone so far as to characterize academic productions, and by association Cot's painting, as no better than "dry rot."<sup>1</sup>

This paper is limited to a brief study of *The Storm*, its subject matter and sources, its reception at the Salon of 1880, and to a small extent, its place in Cot's career. The occasion for the article arose from the discovery of some drawings and other materials relating to *The Storm*, which in themselves seemed worthy of publication. I have no intention of trying to reverse the tide of critical opinion that has largely condemned Cot. But a look at Cot for his own sake and on his own terms may reveal some new subtlety in the old-fashioned myth that the late nineteenth century was polarized in a battle between "good art" and "bad art" (see Figure 2).

Pierre-Auguste Cot (pronounced *kot*) was born February 17, 1837 in Bédarieux, a small city in the

Hérault region in the south of France, about thirty kilometers from Béziers. After successful studies at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts of Toulouse, Cot went to Paris, where he worked mainly in the studio of Léon Cogniet. He made a successful debut at the Salon of 1863, and continued to exhibit until his death in 1883. He enjoyed the protection of the academic sculptor Francisque Duret, whose daughter he married, and of William Bouguereau, with whom he had also worked. In the 1870s, he became a fashionable portraitist. He won various prizes and medals, was decorated as a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor in 1874, and served on numerous committees and juries. Shortly after his untimely death at the age of forty-six (August 2, 1883), a subscription was undertaken for a commemorative monument to the artist, which was erected at Bédarieux in 1892.<sup>2</sup>

Cot's widow sold the painter's *Mireille* of 1882 to the state for the Musée de Luxembourg. His heirs divided the remains of the estate, about half of which ultimately became a bequest to the city of Bédarieux. Most of these works still remain in storage, where they are now rapidly deteriorating, while others are either in private hands or are lost. Of the very few in museum collections, only *The Storm* has received any notice. From 1903 to 1938, however, another large painting by Cot, *Le Printemps* or *Springtime* (Figure 3), was exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum, where it was on extended loan. This picture, now lost, was shown

1. J. Canaday, *Metropolitan Museum of Art Seminars in the Home* (New York, 1959) fasc. 11.

2. A biographical article on Cot has recently appeared: André Signoles, "Pierre-Auguste Cot, peintre," *Etudes sur Pézenas et l'Hérault* 9 (1978) pp. 17–33. See also my "Who Was Pierre-Auguste Cot?," *Nineteenth Century* 6/1 (1980) pp. 36–39.



FIGURE 1

Pierre-Auguste Cot (1837–83), *L'Orage (The Storm)*, signed and dated 1880. Oil on canvas, 92¼ × 61¾ in. (235 × 156.9 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Catharine Lorillard Wolfe, 87.15.134

FIGURE 2

*Good Art? Bad Art?* Advertisement from *Esquire*, December 1970

PAINTING ON LEFT: AFTERWORK BY AN AMERICAN OF ABOUT 1880. PAINTING ON RIGHT: ALBERTO BURRI, ITALY, 1930S.



Good Art? Bad Art?

### What would your judgment be?

Here are two paintings, both of the same subject, and both discussed in the first portfolio of the Metropolitan Museum Seminars in Art program. The one at the left, Pierre Cot's *The Storm*, was held in the highest critical esteem in the 1880s. Today it would be dismissed by most critics as unthinkingly sentimental. The other painting, Oskar Kokoschka's *The Tempest*, was damned as degenerate in the early part of this century. Now it is considered to be one of the finest examples of expressionist art.

If you were unexpectedly asked to judge these paintings, could you express a well-reasoned opinion about them? Or would you be tongue-tied, unwilling to say anything because you're afraid you do not know enough?

A surprising number of otherwise cultivated persons have a blind spot so far as painting is concerned. Visiting a museum, they stand before a respected work of art and see nothing but its surface aspects. It was to help such people that New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and John Canaday, art critic of *The New York Times*, created Art Seminars in the Home, a unique program of assisted self-

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by Cot with astounding success at the Salon of 1873, and had been acquired by John Wolfe, at the sale of whose collection in 1882 it passed into the hands of David C. Lyall. It must have been the presence of *Springtime* in Wolfe's collection that motivated his cousin, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe, to purchase *The Storm* in 1880. The pictures are of roughly the same size and are obviously related in subject in the sense that both show a young, nubile couple. Although the two pictures were not conceived together, they were thus spiritual pendants, and it can be assumed that the

FIGURE 3

After Cot, *Le Printemps (Springtime)*, 1873. Engraving by Amédée and Eugène Varin, 1875. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale)



FIGURES 5–8

Cot, Sketches, ca. 1873–80. Graphite on white paper, approx.  $5\frac{7}{8} \times 3\frac{7}{8}$  in. ( $15 \times 10$  cm.) Paris, private collection (photos: Agraci)

success of the earlier picture led to the creation of the later one.<sup>3</sup>

Related to *The Storm* is a pencil drawing which has been squared off (Figure 4). Comparison with other drawings by Cot confirms its authenticity, but since here the design was made over the squaring (note how the ruled lines are erased where there have been *pentimenti* in the drawing), its use in the creation of the original painting is doubtful. Rather, it probably served as the basis of the etching for an illustrated catalogue of the Salon of 1880, which contained 200 reproductions made from “original artists’ drawings.”<sup>4</sup>

Of greater interest in relation to *The Storm* is a series of sketchbook sheets showing similar subjects

FIGURE 4

Cot, *The Storm*, 1880. Graphite on white paper,  $15\frac{5}{8} \times 11\frac{3}{8}$  in. ( $39 \times 29$  cm.). Paris, private collection (photo: Agraci)

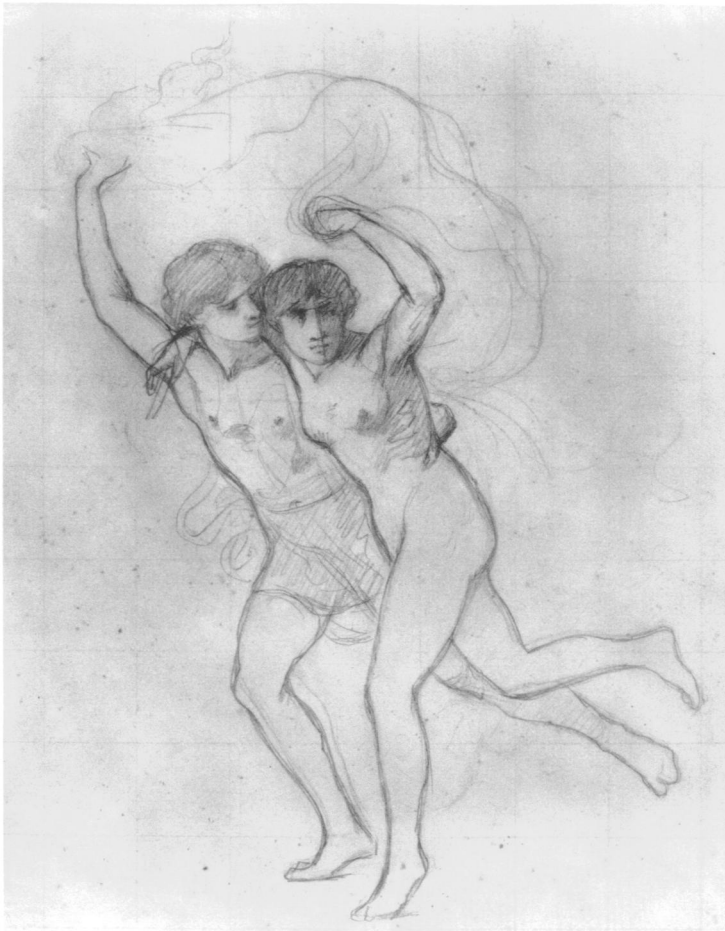


FIGURE 5

*Young Man Carrying a Young Woman*

(Figures 5–8). These must surely have served as experiments that led to the final composition and conception of *The Storm*, and thus they may help us to determine the picture’s actual subject matter or its literary source. Not even Cot’s contemporaries could agree whether the painter had meant to allude to the story of *Paul et Virginie*—first published by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre in 1788 and immensely popular

3. The original *Springtime* measured  $82 \times 49$  in.; David C. Lyall Sale (New York, 1903) no. 105. A signed reduction ( $24 \times 16$  in.) was in the Sterling Sale, New York, 1919. Copies of *Springtime* made while it was on view exist; those I have seen all have a Brooklyn provenance. As for *The Storm*, Cot is said to have made several reductions, but none has so far turned up. (For the Wolfe family connection, see *The Collector* 5 [1894] p. 103.)

4. F. G. Dumas, ed., *Catalogue illustré du Salon* (Paris, 1880) II, no. 70. Along with other pictures, *The Storm* was reproduced on the cover of this book. The same reproduction is used in Earl Shinn [pseud. Edward Strahan], *Art Treasures of America* (Philadelphia, n.d. [1880]) I, p. 131.





FIGURE 6  
*Young Man Carrying a Young Woman*



FIGURE 7  
*Young Man and Woman Seated*

FIGURE 8  
*Couple Crouching and Embracing*

thereafter—or to the fourth-century pastoral romance of *Daphnis and Chloë* by the Greek writer Longus.<sup>5</sup> Our ability to decide on one or the other possibility may furnish us with an indication of the painter's broader intentions. Although both stories

5. Some of these opinions are reviewed in Charles Sterling and Margaretta M. Salinger, *French Paintings: A Catalogue of the Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, 1966) II, p. 194. In the ten years preceding the Salon of 1880, *Paul et Virginie* appeared in no fewer than twelve separate editions. *Daphnis and Chloë* was no less popular. On the former, see Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Paul et Virginie* (1788; Garnier Frères, Paris, 1964) pp. 281–282. On the latter, see *Catalogue général des livres imprimés de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, Authors, XCIX, s.v. Longus.



deal with the progress of love and self-discovery in an adolescent couple, the ancient fable is overtly erotic, with scenes of pursuit, initiation, and lovemaking; whereas in *Paul et Virginie* the sexual interest is sublimated and Bernardin consistently maintains a high moral tone. Even though in its own day *Paul et Virginie* was presumed in some way to have looked back to *Daphnis and Chloë* as a source of inspiration, no mistake could be made about the essentially different aims of the two authors.

Figures 5 and 6 recall a scene from *Paul et Virginie* made famous through an illustration by Girodet-Trioson (Figure 9), in which Paul carries Virginie across the dangerous rapids of the Rivière-noire. Lost in the wilderness until after the crossing, they are then found by their dog, Fidèle, and later by their native friend and servant, Domingue.<sup>6</sup> The resem-

FIGURE 9

Anne-Louis Girodet de Roucy Trioson, *Le Passage du Torrent*, 1806. Engraving, illustration to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Paul et Virginie*, Paris, P. Didot, 1806, opp. p. 32 (photo: New York Public Library)



blance is no more than superficial, however, for even if the animal behind the couple in Figure 5 were a dog, Paul and Virginie are described as having trekked some distance through the woods before encountering Fidèle. Moreover, Cot's couple is shown next to a pool of water or a placid stream rather than churning rapids. Finally, the shepherd's staff held by the girl has no place in this particular scene of *Paul et Virginie*. Although elsewhere Virginie tends a flock of goats, this feature of her activity is itself a direct allusion to the story of Daphnis and Chloë, where the couple tend their flocks together. The animal behind the couple in Cot's drawing, then, with its short tail, characteristic hindquarters, and suggestion of an udder, may imply that Cot wished to exploit more fully and explicitly than had Bernardin the references to Longus.

It is in Figure 7, the most highly finished of the four sketchbook pages, that the girl most clearly wears a garment of the semitransparent type seen in *The Storm* and *Springtime*. The shepherd's staff is still present, leaning against the log to our left, which suggests that all four images have the same source. Indeed, the scene might correspond to a passage in *Daphnis and Chloë* where, having led their flocks to the fields, the couple hug and clasp each other while sitting on the trunk of a tree; in their innocence, they end by lying one on top of the other on the ground.<sup>7</sup> Cot may have avoided explicit eroticism while nevertheless alluding to this scene through the use of the garland motif. Wreaths and garlands of ivy and other leaves are referred to throughout the narrative of *Daphnis and Chloë*.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of this evidence for *The Storm*'s relationship to *Daphnis and Chloë*, it can still be convincingly shown that the specific motif of the couple running from the rain and covered by a billowing drapery corresponds to a famous and often illustrated scene in *Paul et Virginie*:

One day, while descending from the mountaintop, I saw Virginie running from one end of the garden toward the house, her head covered by her overskirt, which she had lifted from behind her in order to gain shelter from

6. Saint-Pierre, *Paul et Virginie*, pp. 100–106.

7. Longus, *Daphnis and Chloë*, trans. George Thornley (1657; Richard Lesley, London, 1947) pp. 68–69.

8. Figure 8 is too generalized to offer any clues to its source.

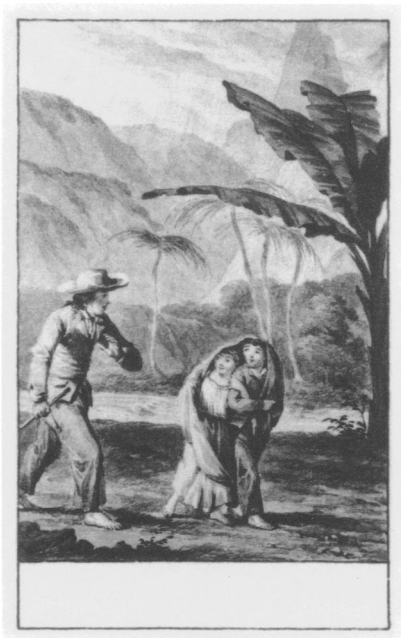


FIGURE 10

Jean-Michel Moreau (le Jeune), Illustration to Saint-Pierre, *Paul et Virginie*, Paris, Didot, 1789, opp. p. 22 (photo: New York Public Library)

FIGURE 11

Hippolyte de la Charlerie, Illustration to Saint-Pierre, *Paul et Virginie*, Paris, Alphonse Lemierre, 1868, p. 31 (photo: New York Public Library)



a rain-shower. From a distance I had thought she was alone; but upon coming closer to help her walk I saw that by the arm she held Paul, who was almost entirely covered by the same blanket. Both were laughing together in the shelter of this umbrella of their own invention.<sup>9</sup>

The obvious appeal of this scene as a visual conceit must have attracted Cot's attention, but he did not exploit other visual novelties the story offered, such as the opportunity to depict the diverse plant life that flourished in the tropical paradise where Paul and Virginie lived. Indeed, Cot failed to identify the location of his scene with any precision at all. Unlike Moreau le Jeune (Figure 10) and Girodet, who specifically drew palm trees in their illustrations, Cot used a forest and a field as background, complementing them with an old castle or fort in the distance, such as might suggest a place in Europe. Although he had paid great attention to floral and botanical detail

in *Springtime*, there too the image lacked any specific geographical reference.

The influence of a particular illustration of this episode may be detected if we compare the position of Cot's figures and the way they dominate the scene to a plate that appeared in 1868 (Figure 11). This composition, made by one Hippolyte de la Charlerie, is a significant departure from the tradition maintained by Moreau le Jeune and subsequent illustrators such as Tony Johannot and Alexandre-Joseph Desenne.<sup>10</sup>

9. Saint-Pierre, *Paul et Virginie*, p. 90 (my translation).

10. The illustrations by De la Charlerie first appeared in *Paul et Virginie* (Alphonse Lemierre, Paris, 1868) and were republished in 1875 and 1876. The most famous illustrator to have done the scene previously was Jean-Michel Moreau (Moreau le Jeune) for the Didot pocket edition of 1789 (Figure 10), for the magnificent Didot edition of 1806 (which also contained plates by Girodet, Gérard, Vernet, and Prud'hon), and others. Alexandre-Joseph Desenne illustrated the L. Janet edition of 1823 and Henry Corbould, the J. Laisné edition of 1834; both series



FIGURE 12  
Giovanni Francesco Romanelli (ca. 1610–62), *The Royal Hunt and Storm*. Tapestry cartoon, gouache on paper laid down on linen. Pasadena, California, The Norton Simon Foundation (photo: Norton Simon Foundation)

Moreover, Charlerie has eliminated the man (the narrator), who is present in all previous conceptions of the scene known to me. However, Charlerie's figures are still small children. It is as if, once seen on their own, Cot had the idea of transforming them into the much more knowing, adolescent couple of *The Storm*.

If the relationship of *The Storm* to *Paul et Virginie* was readily recognizable, so was Cot's deliberate investment of the scene with the spirit of *Daphnis and Chloë*. That the painting contained yet another allusion, however, is suggested by a tapestry design of Giovanni Francesco Romanelli (Figure 12). It shows Dido and Aeneas taking refuge from the storm that has interrupted their hunt.<sup>11</sup> They are about to enter a cave, which can be seen at the extreme right of the

of plates appeared in other subsequent editions, too. The famous Curmer edition of 1838 grouped many romantic illustrators, including Tony Johannot, whose vignette of our scene is on p. 30.

11. I am grateful to Marilyn Aronberg Lavin for drawing my attention to this work.

12. See Ruth Rubenstein, *Giovanni Francesco Romanelli's Dido and Aeneas Tapestry Cartoons* (Pasadena, 1976).

composition. Not only does the cave afford them shelter, but according to the account in Virgil's *Aeneid* (book IV), it is there that their love is consummated. In John Dryden's translation:

The queen, whom sense of honor could not move,  
No longer made a secret of her love,  
But call'd it marriage, by that specious name  
To veil the crime and sanctify the shame.

The suite of tapestries to which this image belongs may have been commissioned by Louis XIV and was extremely popular. It may well have been known to Cot in one form or another, but even if it was not, certainly book IV of the *Aeneid* was known to anyone with pretensions to classical education, such as Cot's contemporaries in France or potential patrons in America.<sup>12</sup> Beyond the question of direct filiation, then, the motif confirms the possibility that the couple in a storm was a conventional *topos*, even if not an overly familiar one, which harbored erotic implications. If this is so, the subject of Cot's *Storm* was once again clearly much more in the spirit of *Daphnis and Chloë* than in that of *Paul et Virginie*. It can be thought of as comparatively straightforward in erotic allusion, though without giving offense to public sensibility. Indeed, further layers of meaning, including a moral tone or an affectation of moral naïveté and its virtuous ramifications, are features too subtle to ask of the painting. Its attractiveness derives rather from Cot's skillful maintenance of restraint and decorum by merely alluding to the erotic through his choice of subject and by the elegance and refinement of his style.

The simplistic view that *The Storm* was an unqualified triumph while the Impressionists were still starving

FIGURE 13  
First page of Eugène Montrosier's account of Cot (*Les Artistes modernes*, Paris, 1881, I, p. 145), with decorations after *The Storm* and *Springtime*

FIGURE 14  
After Cot, *The Storm*, about 1880. Silk tapestry. Paris, private collection (photo: Agraci)

FIGURE 15  
After Cot, *The Storm*. Engraving, illustration to *Nouveau Larousse illustré*, Paris, n.d.



needs to be modified, for while the painting was indeed a great commercial success, it failed to score very high on other counts. A critic named Maurice du Seigneur testified to the extent of its acceptance, although he hardly showed his approval. He wrote: "Mr. Cot has seen the advantage of producing such affected things. He must make a sizable amount of money from them, and we congratulate him on this; but the public is hardly to be congratulated." The kind of picture represented by *The Storm* was, in fact, far from what most thoughtful contemporaries would have accepted as the goal of academic teaching. On the contrary, Du Seigneur for one saw Cot as merely, though rather cleverly, catering to "perfumers and hairdressers, schoolboys and cream-puff poets."<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, one Emile Michel, writing in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, preferred Cot's *Portrait of Mademoiselle de L . . .* to *The Storm*, which he felt was too obviously an attempt to repeat the pattern of *Springtime*. He remarked that it would be difficult to recall a success on the order of the latter, and wondered if the new painting might not saturate the market with reproductions and satiate the painter's own taste for such things.<sup>14</sup> In an illustrated review of the Salon, however, a critic named René Delorme attacked Cot more directly: "Conventionalism triumphs here," he wrote; and he joked that the young couple need not

fear the storm, for "they are made of porcelain, and the rain will never penetrate them." Turning this remark to a serious purpose, he added that Cot seemed to him to exhibit an excessive knowledge of the *métier* of painting, which led him to finish and to polish his work too much: "The result of being soft and shiny is that his flesh is no longer flesh and his leaves are no longer leaves. He departs from nature in trying to perfect and embellish her, and the result of all his efforts is that his work becomes false and disappointing."<sup>15</sup>

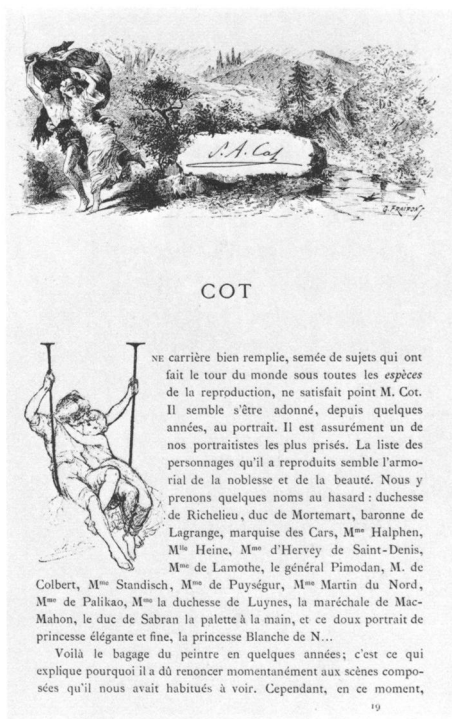
Perhaps the most impartial remarks on Cot's *Storm* were made by Philippe de Chennevières in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. He wrote: "The proof of the sureness and good health of the practical training of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts can be found in the works of its most intimate students, such as Cot, . . . They maintain themselves with an imperturbable equanimity, tranquillity, and perfection, and no matter how loudly certain critics protest their too-pretty banality, the public is not bothered and hurries to view what satisfies its ideal of accomplishment. It would be vain to try to persuade them that the bucolic coquetry of the young boy and his girl friend running so gaily from the rain . . . has nothing to do with the disquietude and the rude preoccupations of true art."<sup>16</sup> Chennevières thus confirmed the opinion of René Delorme,

13. Maurice du Seigneur, *L'Art et les artistes au Salon de 1880* (Paris, 1880) pp. 306-331.

14. Emile Michel, "Le Salon de 1880," *Revue des Deux Mondes* 39 (1880) p. 682.

15. René Delorme, "La Peinture de genre et de portrait," in *L'Exposition des Beaux-Arts (Salon de 1880)* (Paris, 1880) I, n.p.

16. Philippe de Chennevières, "Salon de 1880," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 21 (1880) p. 510.



gr. Parmi les Italiens, le Guaspre et Salvator



L'Orage, d'après Cot.

avons aussi de Rubens quelques belles peintures de genre, notamment un admirable Arc-en-ciel.



FIGURE 16  
Edward Sorel,  
Jacket for Jessica  
Mitford's *A Fine Old  
Conflict*, London,  
1977

though less maliciously. For while recognizing Cot's artistic skill, he accused the artist of applying it to a banality.

Finally, it is worth noting that taken in the broader context of artistic discussion generated by the Salon of 1880, the attention paid to Cot was minimal. The same year saw the appearance of Bonnat's *Job*, Cabanel's *Phèdre*, Cormon's *Cain*, Henner's *La Fontaine*, Gustave Moreau's *Galathée*, and Puvis de Chavannes's cartoons for the decorations of the Musée d'Amiens. Bastien-Lepage's *Joan of Arc*, which is also at the Metropolitan Museum, was exhibited in 1880 too. It was a rich Salon, and one should not attribute more importance to Cot than he deserves. Indeed, contrary to the implication of those who use him to epitomize the art of the Academy, he seems to have been recognized for what he was—merely a fashionable painter. It is true, of course, that he won many of the standard honors and that his skills were found exemplary. But he was decidedly not the ideal of the academicians, who sought an art of more profound gravity.

That *The Storm* quickly came to stand for Cot's art as a whole is suggested by its adaptation as part of a design heading the article on Cot in Eugène Montrosier's *Les Artistes modernes* (Figure 13).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the picture was almost immediately engraved (by Amédée and Eugène Varin). The commission for the engrav-

ing, like that for the reproduction of *Springtime*, apparently came from Knoedler and Co. (both paintings were in New York). Like *Springtime*, *The Storm* was also reproduced as a wall hanging in the form of small tapestries (Figure 14), and it was copied by a host of decorative artists on fans, screens, and porcelains—so much so that one critic lamented: "What good fortune for business interests: here is *The Storm*! And we shall soon be flooded by waves of photographs, fans, screens, and other objects from novelty stores."<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps most indicative of the picture's fame was its use as an illustration in the article "Orage" of the *Nouveau Larousse illustré* (Figure 15), which was current during the first quarter of this century. Of a number of works of art listed on this subject, including works by notables such as Rubens and Salvator Rosa, Cot's picture, by this time already at the Metropolitan Museum, was chosen to represent the theme.<sup>19</sup> Caricatures and numerous adaptations constitute another form of testimony to a picture's widespread familiarity. One, which I have seen in a private collection, is a cloth screen with two imbecilic figures running below the drapery converted to an American flag. A more recent example of this genre—and surely there have been many others—was drawn by Edward Sorel for the jacket of Jessica Mitford's book, *A Fine Old Conflict* (Figure 16). The storm-threatened couple are Mitford and her husband. Communist sympathizers at the time she writes of, they are sheltered by a red drapery emblazoned with the hammer and sickle. Even *The Storm*'s appearance in the Metropolitan Museum Seminars (see Figure 2), although its fame had turned to infamy, bears witness to the picture's curious iconic status.

It is to be hoped that once the preconceptions caused on the one hand by ahistorical standards and on the other by the need for scapegoats have subsided, *The Storm* will still survive on its own as an elegant and accomplished example of a particular brand of art that flourished in the late nineteenth century. For it exemplifies not the ideals but rather the taste of the period, to which its creator catered so generously.

17. Eugène Montrosier, *Les Artistes modernes* (Paris, 1881) I, p. 145.

18. Du Seigneur, *L'Art et les artistes au Salon de 1880*, p. 30.

19. *Nouveau Larousse illustré, dictionnaire universel encyclopédique* (Paris, n.d.) s.v. *Orage*.