

---

H-France Review Vol. 16 (October 2016), No. 215

Blaise Duclos, *Frans Pourbus le Jeune (1569-1622): Le Portrait d'apparat à l'aube du Grand Siècle entre Habsbourg, Médicis, et Bourbons*. Paris : Faton, 2011. 399 pp. Plates, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. 148€ (cl.) ISBN: 978-2-87844-151-2.

Review by Sarah R. Cohen, University at Albany, State University of New York.

The extensive title of Blaise Duclos's monograph on the Flemish court portraitist Frans Pourbus the Younger signals the scope of its ambition. Into a traditional study of the life, career, and works of a single artist and a *catalogue raisonné* of his oeuvre, Duclos has woven a social and political analysis of international European court culture in the first quarter of the seventeenth century and the contribution Pourbus made through his astutely tuned portraits of significant individuals. Pourbus was, indeed, an eminently cosmopolitan painter. Flemish by birth and training, he worked successively for Archduke Albert and Archduchess Isabella, the Habsburg governors of Flanders; Vincent Gonzaga and Eleanor de Medici, Duke and Duchess consort of Mantua; and, finally, in the court of France under the primary patronage of the recently widowed queen mother, Marie de Medici. Duclos argues that Pourbus's peripatetic career epitomized the interconnections among the various courts of Europe at the turn of the seventeenth century, as suggested by the political connections of Marie de Medici herself, who was daughter of a Medici duke and an Austrian Habsburg archduchess, married a Bourbon king, and arranged marriages for her own children with rulers of Spain, England, and Savoy.

Duclos persuasively argues that a key to Pourbus's success in serving this complex matrix of negotiations and alliances was his ability to adjust his pictorial style subtly to suit the particular needs and tastes of the court for which he was working. The visual evidence suggests that he could, in fact, "turn on a dime." One of his first portraits of Vincent Gonzaga from c. 1600 (cat. P.A. 18) already exhibits the virtuosic attention to precious objects—their intricate details, illusionistic textures and arrangements in space—that was favored in the Mantuan court. Far from exhibiting the repetitive, uniform quality often attributed to Pourbus's style by art historians in the past, his paintings, in Duclos's extensive analyses, emerge as not only highly accomplished but socially and politically intelligent.

Because Duclos's goals were so all-encompassing, the monograph is monumental, even a little unwieldy, in its factual, documentary, and descriptive exhaustiveness. The five chapters of text move chronologically through Pourbus's career, each featuring a wealth of subsections that address the artist, formal features of his work, the nature of the court profiled in the chapter, and Pourbus's specific court service in his many portraits of the ruling families. This monographic examination is followed by a *catalogue raisonné* of works securely attributed to Pourbus, those he made in collaboration with assistants, and those which the author has rejected as not by the artist's hand. In his entries on specific paintings in the catalogue of authentic works, Duclos assesses the nature and context of the commission and the particular function the work was intended to serve, if these facts are known. We learn, for example, the fine distinctions among Pourbus's many portraits of Marie de Medici's eldest daughter Elisabeth that Pourbus made both before and after she became Isabel of Bourbon in 1615, new wife of

the young Philip IV and future queen of Spain. In the case of a pendant pair from 1616 that featured Louis XIII on one canvas and Elisabeth on the other, Duclos explains that while traditional protocol would have dictated that Louis XIII's own new wife, the Spanish Infanta Anne of Austria, should occupy the other half of the pair, Marie de Medici substituted her own daughter, for "Il importait de ne laisser aucune place à cette rivale dans l'ordre politique" (p. 258). Duclos's assessment correlates with his overall representation of Marie de Medici as overtly ambitious to project her own queenly authority, an argument that he makes repeatedly and persuasively throughout the text.

Unusually for a *catalogue raisonné* of this scope, all works available for reproduction are presented in color whenever possible (including the rejected works). Combined with the color plates of details and enlargements that appear on most pages of the preceding text, this makes for an unprecedented opportunity to examine Pourbus's work as no one has been able to do before. Given the subtleties of his skill and the importance of detail to understanding his work, the wealth of color illustration is most welcome, although this reviewer could not help but wonder how such a publishing project could possibly gain funding. Following the *catalogue raisonné*, one finds every extant document from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both in manuscript and printed forms, that mention Pourbus's name. Many of these are letters in Spanish, Italian or French sent within or between the courts that Pourbus served, and they thus provide some insight into the role of art and artists in assimilating a European court society that transcended geographical boundaries.

Duclos, who is curator of Dutch and Flemish Painting at the Louvre, displays a museological concern with establishing an artist's oeuvre through extensive documentation and careful examination of physical evidence and style, and he accomplishes these goals impeccably. His concomitant interest in assessing the artist's work within its historical, and especially political context, links Duclos's project with a more recent trend in studies of court portraiture that take into account the notion that early modern identity was explicitly *fashioned*, in this case by artists working for patrons who intended to display or use for ritual their courtly likenesses, or to present them as gifts or exchanges with other, sometimes rival court centers. Quite a number of recent publications in art history have taken this approach to the court portrait as an object whose significance derived to a great extent from the particular context in which it would be used or seen.<sup>[1]</sup> The best of these studies demonstrate the ways in which portraiture made a unique contribution to the project of fashioning courtly identity by pointing to specific *pictorial* features—format, medium, composition, painterly style, color—that served to promote physical, psychological, or socially persuasive effects.

One of Duclos's central arguments serves as an enlightening example. He begins by noting that all three of the courts for which Pourbus worked were in some way ancillary to an ultimate political authority: the Habsburg regents of Flanders to the King of Spain; the Duke of Mantua as a vassal to the Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolf II; and Marie de Medici as the widow and mother to kings in a country that denied women the right to rule. Pourbus nevertheless made his subjects *appear* as if they were ruling monarchs, using particular pictorial effects and subtly borrowing from earlier art to enhance the status of his ambitious sitters. In a life-size portrait of Marie de Medici just after her son had banished her to the château of Blois in 1617 (P.A. 95), Pourbus gave her a looming presence that fills the entire lateral space of the composition, while her black widow's veil puffs behind her like an aureole. Moreover, the artist set the queen mother before a balustrade overlooking a sunset sky that recalled, among other eminent portrayals, Titian's equestrian portrait of the Habsburg Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, Marie de Medici's illustrious great-uncle (Madrid, Prado). With the indispensable help of Pourbus, Duclos argues, the queen mother promoted, even in exile, an image of regal authority.

Some of Duclos's other initiatives to contextualize the significance of Pourbus's court portraiture remain more open-ended, sometimes frustratingly so. A case in point is his fascinating suggestion that in adjusting his style of painting to suit the tastes of Vincent Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, Pourbus absorbed into his approach the aesthetic of the *Kunstammer*, or collection of art and wonders, which, Duclos

claims, was a particular obsession of the Mantuan Duke. To argue his case, Duclos persuasively demonstrates the close ties between the courts of Gonzaga in Mantua and Rudolf II in Prague, a connection not only political in nature but aesthetic and cultural as well, especially evident in the rulers' mutual fascination for all that was "marvelous" in art and nature, a quality that the *Kunstammer* was intended to highlight. Rudolf II kept what was likely the most extensive *Kunstammer* in all of Europe in the very early years of the seventeenth century, and Duclos suggests that portraits by Pourbus, which Gonzaga sent to Prague, found their place among Rudolf's *Kunstammer* treasures.

Of more immediate importance for Pourbus as an artist, Duclos asserts, was the effect the marvelous wonders of the *Kunstammer* had on his own style. But how, exactly, was this impression manifested? This reviewer found much to ponder. It does appear that in working for the Duke of Mantua, Pourbus took extra trouble to fashion highly decorative objects—jeweled brooches, intricately engraved armor, flowers and simulated feathers in the hair—and he also carefully positioned his exquisitely crafted objects in relation to one another, as they might be found displayed, for example, on a table in a *Kunstammer*. In a portrait of little Eleanor Gonzaga as a child (P.A. 23), Pourbus attached to her sleeve an extraordinary brooch featuring a monkey fashioned of enamel and gold, and he also worked even tinier figures into the necklaces of other members of the ducal family (e.g., P.A. 26). But do these elements, alone, constitute a *Kunstammer* aesthetic? The author's guidance would have been most welcome here.

More problematic is Duclos's summary discussion of the "visual rhetoric" of Pourbus's portraiture in a section entitled *Poser le prince* (pp. 128-29). Referring to Marc Fumaroli's well-known writing on the visual "eloquence" of seventeenth-century art, especially in France, Duclos argues that Pourbus's art fairly epitomized this quality, dedicated as the artist was to serving the interests of his patrons as players in a highly theatricalized court culture.<sup>[2]</sup> But the physical side of what it meant to "pose" in the seventeenth century, especially in elite and courtly culture, is omitted from Duclos's discussion, to the detriment of opening possibilities for new ways to assess Pourbus's portraiture. Duclos cites the definition of "pose" from Furetière's dictionary of 1690 as the "disposition convenable" later employed by the Royal Academy of Painting, and he associates such decorous posing with Pourbus's carefully positioned and richly clothed sitters.

In the process, however, Duclos neglects another of Furetière's definitions that might also have a bearing on Pourbus's project: "this man walks with good grace, he is well *posé* on his legs" (p. 129).<sup>[3]</sup> Considering the fact that all of Pourbus's sitters needed to develop their own practice of grace not only in walking but in sitting, standing, and gesturing in a court setting, it is likely that they would have assessed the artist's portraits at least in part on modes of bodily comportment that they themselves had to learn and practice every day. In this section Duclos does give a good example of how court ambitions could be internalized, but one wishes for some discussion of the *visual* connections between courtly style as practiced by courtiers and as pictured by the artist. The author also missed an opportunity to observe that Pourbus himself must have had consummate skills as a courtier in order to work so closely with his various ducal and monarchical patrons. Although not knighted as were his compatriots Rubens and van Dyck, like them, Pourbus knew how to serve and flatter his international patrons both overtly and subtly, crucial skills of the early modern courtier.

Given the large scope of Duclos's project, perhaps it was inevitable that certain sections would have to be curtailed. He has, in any case, provided his readers with many avenues for future research as well as a very solid foundation in the nature, extent, and context of Pourbus's artistic production. The book will be useful to curators and art historians, as well as to historians who seek to bring material culture into their examinations of European court society. Because Pourbus's work for the "court" of Marie de Medici was so extensive and important a part of his late career, historians of early Bourbon France might find the book especially provocative. Yet, among Duclos's many accomplishments is his demonstration that one cannot understand the pictorial language of French court portraiture without

understanding the many ways its sitters and artists such as Pourbus were also invested in the cultures, politics, and practices of other European courts.

## NOTES

[1] Examples include Laura R. Bass, *The Drama of the Portrait: Theater and Visual Culture in Early Modern Spain* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008); Joanna Woodall, *Anthonis Mor: Art and Authority* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2007); Marc Fumaroli, *Portraits et pouvoirs: de Rome à Paris* (Paris: Faton, 2007); Annette Dixon, *Women Who Ruled: Queens, Goddesses, Amazons in Renaissance and Baroque Art* (London: Merrill, in Association with the University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2002); Sarah R. Cohen, *Art, Dance, and the Body in French Culture of the Ancien Régime* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). The classic study of fashioning identity in the early modern era is Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[2] Marc Fumaroli, *L'Âge de l'éloquence* [1980] (Geneva: Droz, 2002).

[3] English translation by the author.

Sarah R. Cohen  
University at Albany, State University of New York  
[scohen@albany.edu](mailto:scohen@albany.edu)

Copyright © 2013 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172