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Colin B. Bailey, Philip Conisbee, and Thomas W. Gaehtgens, *The Age of Watteau, Chardin and Fragonard: Masterpieces of French Genre Painting*. Ed. Colin B. Bailey. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003. ix + 412 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, appendix, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-300-09946-0.

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An exhibition catalogue is a peculiar sort of academic book. One of its distinguishing traits is the manner in which it often decenters and obscures the question of authorship. This particular book is the by-product of an exhibition organized by three different curators: Colin B. Bailey, now Chief Curator of The Frick Collection, New York; Philip Conisbee, Senior Curator of European Paintings at the National Gallery of Art; and Thomas W. Gaehtgens, Director, Centre allemand d'histoire de l'art, Paris, and Professor at the Freie Universität Berlin. No less than twelve people composed the entries for the 113 pictures contained in the catalogue, excluding those who wrote essays. This is a text, in short, authored by many hands.

Its unifying theme is genre painting. When art historians use the terms "genre painting" today, they are referring to a certain category of subject. Analyzing the subject matter of a work of art can be quite complicated. For example, a representation of a man with a lamb may be a portrait (the likeness of a specific individual) or a religious image such as Christ as the Good Shepherd. It may be a character drawn from Graeco-Roman literature or historical narrative. It may be a symbol of martyrdom or an allegory of Spring. Or it may simply be a shepherd engaged in a characteristic activity, that is, tending sheep, a subject deemed "genre," or the representation of everyday life. Often the subjects of artworks will exceed the limits of just one category. In an art history course, the subject matter of Velasquez's *Las Meninas* or Rembrandt's *The Syndics of the Drapers' Guild* will be discussed routinely in terms of both portraiture and genre.

Subjects of everyday life proliferated in European art of the seventeenth century, though clearly many of these are allegorical representations, too. Genre subjects are represented in literally hundreds of canvases and prints. Noteworthy practitioners included Caravaggio and his French imitator, Georges de La Tour, Flemish artists such as Teniers and Rubens, and Dutch artists in the Leyden tradition of "minute refinement" (*fijnschilder*) like Gerrit Dou. French eighteenth-century artists often pictured subjects of everyday life resembling those by Rubens, Teniers, and Dou, and, like them, they did not use a consistent term to describe them. The first dictionary definition of the word *genre* was authored by Claude-Henri Watelet in 1792. Watelet labeled subjects of flowers and fruits as *genre*, along with the depiction of landscape, animals and "actions or particular scenes of everyday life" (p. 5).

As an analytical tool applied to artistic practice of the ancien régime, "genre painting" would appear to be a blunt instrument. The concept wants narrowing and refining if we are to learn something about how Watteau's *Venetian Pleasures* (pp. 138-139) or Greuze's *Broken Eggs* (pp. 248-251) engage the social present under the rubric of that richly suggestive brief, "everyday life."

In his lengthy introductory essay, Colin B. Bailey moves in the opposite direction by proposing "an expansionist view of genre" (p. 9). As a result, the catalogue of this exhibition draws up a definition of eighteenth-century French genre painting that admits all the subjects inventoried by Watelet except for fruits and flowers, an omission for which no reason is given. The bemused art historian will find numbered among the exemplars of "genre painting" in this text Jean-Baptiste Oudry's picture of a nursing hound, *Lice Feeding her Pups*, Joseph Vernet's *Constructing a Main Road*, Carle Van Loo's *A Pasha Having his Mistress' Portrait Painted*, and Pierre Subleyras' *The Amorous Courtesan*, a literary subject taken from La Fontaine's *Contes et nouvelles en vers*. Thus defined, the terms "genre painting" become so broad as to be practically meaningless.

Bailey believes "an expansionist view of genre can be sustained--and that it can and should be is the thesis of this exhibition" (p. 9) without providing a very clear justification for it. It is evident, though, that one purpose the expansionist view serves is rhetorical. Genre painting is contrasted with history painting. According to the narrative produced by this text, history painting is identified with the Academy, which is seen as a bastion of tradition and hierarchy. Readers will receive the impression that a conflict existed between a "flourishing" (p. 9) genre painting and a scornful Academy. Classes of subject matter become confused with social classes and as a result, in the words of Barbara Gaetgens, "the formation of a theory of genre painting" becomes a manifestation of the "intellectual and political emancipation of the bourgeoisie" (p. 58).

There is an implied theory of social change informing this formulation, and most of its assumptions have been questioned in recent years.[1] From an art historical perspective, the weakest link in the chain is overstating the importance of Félibien's theory of the hierarchy of genres, devised in 1668, to the production of eighteenth-century art. Specifically, the authors confuse a lower-case academicism, a preoccupation of the nineteenth-century obsessed with theories of ideal beauty, with the upper-case Academy of the ancien régime.[2]

Even Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Jason Gaiger--the editors of an anthology of period art theory over a thousand pages long--have emphasized the debilitated forces of theory at the time. They write, "In fact, it is true of the early eighteenth century as a whole that its major painters tended neither to generate written theory themselves nor to attract any considered reflection on their work from others...There is a general lesson to be learned here--or rather reiterated in the face of this specific example. Developments in the theory of art do not necessarily proceed in step with developments in practice...At no period in the long history of the modern is this lack of symmetry so clearly demonstrated as it is during the first half of the eighteenth century." [3] In their handling of eighteenth-century genre painting, the authors of the text under review reify the symmetry that the editors of *Art in Theory* warn against presuming, even while they document the considerable support and succor genre painting received (pp. 12-14).

Félibien's hierarchy of subject matter, which actually placed allegory and not history painting at the summit of value, was of negligible interest to artists until 1769, when Jean-Baptiste Greuze forced the Academy to reject him as a history painter on the basis of a reception piece of questionable merit. The early eighteenth-century Academy, for whom Charles Lebrun was still a relatively recent memory, knew that when Félibien wrote, he did so from the perspective of his post as Historiographer of the Royal Buildings. His theoretical musings were hardly disinterested. On the contrary, he was predisposed to give priority to a representational system suited to extolling the virtues of his employer, Louis XIV.[4] In his hierarchy, Félibien lined up the various subjects in a ranking order modeled on the Great Chain of Being; thus renderings of "Fruits, Flowers, or Shells" fell below landscape, and portraits held less challenge for the able painter than "History and Fable." "And soaring yet higher," the most excellent artists "must by allegorical Compositions, know how to hide under the Vail (sic) of Fable the Virtues of great Men, and the most sublime Mysteries." [5]

The subjects we refer to as genre are absent from Félibien's taxonomy. This is probably because French artists who painted genre, such as Matthieu Le Nain (p. 43), were generalists, not specialists, and consequently identified as history painters. No specialists in genre belonged to the Academy in Félibien's day, whereas it did number among its members specialists in flower, animal, and portrait painting. For instance, Félibien would have known that Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer concentrated on painting flowers, Nicasiaus Bernaerts on animals, and Pierre Rabon on portraits. Had there been such specialists in genre, one wonders what words Félibien would have used to designate the subjects they rendered.

Although Bailey allows that in the eighteenth century "most history painters were also genre painters on occasion" (p. 6, p. 10), the phenomenon cut both ways. Jean-Baptiste Santerre, for example, was accepted into the Academy as a portrait painter and given the portrait of Noel Coypel to paint as his reception piece. Instead, he produced a history painting, *Suzanne au Bain*, and was received as a history painter in 1704.[6] Jean-Baptiste Oudry was received in 1719 on the basis of an allegorical subject, *L'abondance et ses attributs*, "mélant peinture d'histoire et nature morte." [7] Jean-Jacques Bachelier was received by the Academy as a flower painter but permitted to submit a different reception piece in 1764, *La Charité romaine*, for which he was received "une seconde fois dans le genre de l'histoire." [8] Bachelier's "lacklustre" painting (p. 9) is mentioned by Bailey, but receives no further comment or analysis.

In light of the importance the text ascribes to the hierarchy of genres, one would expect these cases to receive more attention than they do. That they do not is due in some measure to the book's organization, which eschews an order based on subjects such as the *fête galante*, for an arrangement dictated by artist's name, beginning with Antoine Watteau and ending with Louis-Léopold Boilly. Since Watteau, Chardin, Fragonard, and Greuze are represented by approximately a dozen pictures apiece, the unifying theme becomes invisible, overshadowed by a sequence of monographs describing the life and work of each individual artist. Although exhibitions organized by art museums are likely to opt for this mode because it enables them to retain the concept of the masterpiece, the number of different authors involved in the text under review creates an unusually meandered discourse. The essays preceding the actual catalogue of the exhibition wander from everyday life in the seraglio (pp. 106-119) to the preferences of Frederick the Great for genre painting (pp. 78-89). While interesting, they do not furnish much of a compass to lead the reader out of the maze.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

- Colin B. Bailey, "Surveying Genre in Eighteenth-Century French Painting"
- Barbara Gaetgens, "The Theory of French Genre Painting and Its European Context"
- Martin Schieder, "'Sorti de son genre': Genre Painting and Boundary Crossing at the End of the Ancien Régime"
- Thomas W. Gaetgens, "Genre Paintings in Eighteenth-Century Collections"
- Katie Scott, "Child's Play"
- Marianne Roland Michel, "Exoticism and Genre Painting in Eighteenth-Century France"

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#### NOTES

[1] The idea of a "bourgeois" Enlightenment and revolutionary movement has been under assault by the revisionist movement in revolutionary historiography for decades. Sara Maza has been in the forefront of historians discrediting the Marxian paradigm, first with her article, "Luxury, Morality, and Social Change: Why There Was No Middle-Class Consciousness in Prerevolutionary France," *The Journal of Modern History* 69 (June 1997), 199-229, and more recently with her book, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie, An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[2] Jacqueline Lichtenstein makes this point in her article "De l'idée de la peinture à l'analyse du tableau, Une mutation essentielle de la théorie de l'art," *Revue d'esthétique* 31/32 (1997), 17-35, esp. p. 35. All the articles in this issue are devoted to the birth of artistic theory in France, 1640-1720.

[3] Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger, eds., *Art in Theory 1648-1815, An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. 296-297.

[4] See Thomas Kirchner, "La nécessité d'une hiérarchie des genres," *Revue d'esthétique* 31/32 (1997), 187-196.

[5] Quotations come from the 1740 English translation reprinted by Harrison, Wood and Gaiger in *Art in Theory*, 108-118, esp. p. 112.

[6] *Les peintres du roi, 1648-1793*, Exhibition, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours & Musée des Augustins, à Toulouse (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2000), p. 123-124.

[7] *Les peintres du roi, 1648-1793*, p. 142-143.

[8] *Les peintres du roi, 1648-1793*, p. 179-181.

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