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Willa Z. Silverman, *The New Bibliopolis: French Book Collectors and the Culture of Print 1880-1914*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. xvii + 312 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, notes, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8020-9211-3.

Review by Charles Rearick, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Willa Z. Silverman's new study puts a spotlight on a lively bibliophile culture that a small group of innovative connoisseurs nurtured in fin-de-siècle Paris. Her title keyword, the neologism "Bibliopolis," refers to a utopian community of such booklovers, as envisioned in 1897 by writer and bibliophile Octave Uzanne, who coined the word. In contrast to the title, her subtitle does the job of plainly stating the focus of the study. It does not, however, bring out her most important point about the book collectors: in contrast to earlier generations of bibliophiles, they did much more than simply collect fine books. They also produced new ones. That is, they commissioned authors, artists, printers, and binders to make the new collectibles, above all contemporary works with beautiful illustrations in the latest artistic styles. And through the production process they made myriad aesthetic decisions, selecting bindings, paper, illustrations, and typography. Then they bought and gave away the new *livres de luxe* or sold them in their own bookshops, publicized them, wrote articles about them, published *catalogues raisonnés*, formed new bibliophile societies, and took part in their associations' frequent meetings and banquets. In short, they not only made luxury books the center of their cultural and social life, but also created "a new culture of book collecting" (p. 5), a culture of "creative" rather than antiquarian bibliophilia.

Silverman places this small rarified world expertly in a broad fin-de-siècle context, taking note of technological advances in publishing as well as cultural, economic, and social conditions. The cultural themes that her elite exemplify are the now familiar fears and hopes treated in many current histories of the period [1]: fears of decadence, democratization, and mass culture; male fears of the *femme nouvelle* and the *femme fatale*; hopes of attaining beauty in a seamless fusion of life and art, dandyism and *l'art pour l'art*, and hopes of consolidating a new aristocracy of aesthetic distinction.

In social terms Silverman characterizes her bibliophile elite as bohemian upper bourgeois. Several exemplars of the new Bibliopolis are well known aesthetes of the period: namely, Edmond de Goncourt, Robert Montesquiou, and the fictional protagonist of Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À Rebours*, des Esseintes. But the bibliophile who is at the center of this study is not so well-known: Octave Uzanne. Of all the creative collectors, he was the most visionary and oft published as well as one of the most active in all spheres of the new culture of print. Like his mentors the Goncourt brothers, Uzanne was reactionary in many ways: he was anti-democracy, anti-mass production, anti-mass culture, anti-Semitic, and anti-Americanization (a catch-all for the mediocrity and vulgarity associated with mass production and hyped advertising). Yet he welcomed new technology (photomechanical printing processes, for example), new aesthetic styles, and contemporary authors and artists for the new *livres de luxe*. Uzanne's Bibliopolis was filled with art nouveau illustrations, prints, furniture, as well as symbolist literature and art.

One of the great strengths of this study is the wide-ranging analysis of the meanings that books had for the collectors. Books, as the author puts it, were polysemous symbolic goods. To collectors, they were variously valued as *objets d'art*, showpieces of craftsmanship, home decor accessories, collectible bibelots, fetishes, literary texts, and documentation sources. Besides sharing a passion for collecting, the book lovers shared a driving desire for social distinction. They sought to elevate themselves not only above the world of profit-driven commerce and mass culture, but also above other bibliophiles of their time who were less discriminating and backward-looking.

In a fascinating, complex chapter on “women and the bibliophilic imagination,” Silverman shows the extent to which book collecting and books themselves were charged with gendered connotations. Virtually all the collectors were men, many of them bachelors, some with a fondness for erotica. Drawing on texts and imagery from bibliophile circles in general, Silverman shows that they found enjoyment in hunting, possessing, seeing, and touching their beautifully bound objects of desire, typically regarding them as pleasure-giving female companions. A few went so far as to seek out volumes covered in female human skin. The bookmen in general viewed women as “the enemies” (p. 165)—the enemies of both books and collectors. By joining with other men in the sociability of bibliophile societies, sharing the experiences of hunting and collecting their female-proxy objects, Silverman suggests, they distanced themselves from bibliophilia’s overtones of femininity and homosexuality.

In her conclusion, instead of looking back over the history just recounted, Silverman reflects on the future of the book, as imagined by some of the more imaginative fin-de-siècle bibliophiles, Uzanne and Robida in particular. Projecting forward from emergent new technologies of their time, they foresaw the end of the book in its traditional material form. In their imaginings, audio (more than visual) devices would replace print: instead of reading, people would listen to phonograph recordings and the “*storyographe*” (proto- books-on-tape).

Silverman’s work is, above all, a well-researched history of luxury book production in fin-de-siècle France, highlighting fine illustrated books whose artful features can be seen in her many illustrations (unfortunately, all in black-and-white, though breakthroughs in color illustrations are an important part of the story). As part of a series titled “Studies in Book and Print Culture,” *The New Bibliopolis* includes plentiful details on new techniques for printing, illustrating, and binding books. It also provides also a broad, well-informed historical explanation for a remarkable chapter in the development of print culture.

At the same time, from the perspective of more general French studies, this new book makes a valuable contribution to the history of Parisian high culture. It does so by illuminating the mentalities and practices of a small but innovative sector of that elite culture. Unlike the conservatives who turned to art nouveau and craftsmanship as antidotes to social strife and national decline—as Debora Silverman has shown<sup>[2]</sup>--the bibliophiles had no grand vision for society, no proposals for social reconciliation through crafts and art. Rather they sought maximum distinction for themselves; their ideal was an exclusive utopia for the “aristocrats of taste.” That entailed acquiring rarer and more costly books, drawing on their inherited fortunes to finance smaller print runs, even the unique volume—all for the collections and prestige of the ultra-refined few.

Uzanne’s bibliopolis of moneyed, misogynistic “snobs” (the author’s word, used repeatedly) was tiny, and so was its impact on the society around them. Yet that small self-absorbed elite was remarkably fruitful. In ways similar to what Christophe Prochasson has shown for the capital’s literary and artistic aesthetes<sup>[3]</sup>, Uzanne and his fellow conspicuous-consumers networked and orchestrated an array of stellar talents for the cause of fine book production. In their pursuit of distinction, they brought into fruitful collaboration such artists as Félicien Rops, Albert Robida, Félix Vallotton, Eugène Grasset, and Toulouse-Lautrec, along with writers such as Huysmans, Guy de Maupassant, Jean Richepin, Anatole France, Paul Adam, and the Goncourt brothers. In revulsion against mass production and grubby

commercialism, they threw themselves into new initiatives and enhanced the book arts. Working to advance their individual interests and their small niche of elite culture, they played historically important roles as cultural intermediaries, patrons, and promoters. The new Bibliopolis, though hermetic in intent, thus contributed to making turn-of-the-century Paris the great cultural hub and hothouse that it so famously was.

#### NOTES

[1] Recent histories with similar themes include: Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) and Lisa Tiersten, *Marianne in the Market: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-siècle France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). Still valuable are older works on consumption and consumer practices in the same period: Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981) and Rosalind H. Williams, *Dream Worlds, Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

[2] Debora L. Silverman, *Art nouveau in fin-de-siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

[3] Christophe Prochasson, *Paris 1900, Essai d'histoire culturelle* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1999).

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