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Nicole Garnier-Pelle, Anne Foray-Carlier, Marie-Christine Anselm, *The Monkeys of Christophe Huet*, translated by Sharon Grevet, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2011. 176 pp. 360 color illustrations, Notes, Bibliography \$50.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1 60606-065-0.

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The *Grande* and *Petite Singeries* at the Château of Chantilly invite visitors to enjoy monkey business. Commissioned by Louis-Henri, Duc de Bourbon, Prince de Condé (1692-1740) and located in the upper and lower apartments of the château, these recently restored and remarkably preserved rooms are masterworks of rococo interior decoration which feature painted panels of monkeys and humans playing in arabesque frames and interpose Chinese figures with *naturalia* and art. In these decorative cycles, playful monkeys imitate Chinese masters challenging the very precepts of *mimesis*. Monkeys and masters invert roles as they hunt, frolic, barter and perform scientific experiments, thus appealing to historians of science, eighteenth-century history, and colonial trade. *The Monkeys of Christophe Huet: Singeries in French Decorative Art*, authored by Nicole Garnier-Pelle, chief curator of patrimony for the Domaine of Chantilly, Anne Forray-Carlier, chief curator at the Museum of Decorative Arts, Paris, and Marie-Christine Anselm, art historian, forsakes the interdisciplinary interpretation of monkeys aping humans in favor of a more traditional art historical and monographic study. Christophe Huet (1700-1759) is the major focus of this richly illustrated book that will be of special interest to art historians and historians of eighteenth-century France.

Garnier-Pelle provides a very brief overview of *Singeries and Exoticism*, tracing the monkey as a “diabolical creature, a negative image that imitated the Creator and thus a sign of heresy” until seventeenth-century Flemish painters exploited the dressed monkey as a mode of visual satire. This minimalist overview attempts to explain the exotic appeal of monkeys, when Garnier-Pelle suggests that “since the animal was exotic to Europe, the monkey is inextricably tied to all things foreign (p.19).” Throughout the book, exoticism, *chinoiserie*, *singeries* and *turqueries* are treated as interchangeable terms, thus denying that these motifs encoded an aestheticization of otherness that engaged standards of taste and patterns of consumption in seventeenth and early eighteenth-century Europe.[1] The editorial decision to suppress a lively discussion of *chinoiserie* is surprising in light of the fact that Prince Louis-Henri created a soft paste porcelain manufacture at Chantilly in c.1725 that drew inspiration from his own East Asian porcelain collection.[2]

In the section dedicated to *Singeries in France before Huet*, Garnier-Pelle presents a succinct synopsis of arabesque decoration, tracing the apparition of *singeries* to Huet’s mentor Claude III Audran. Garnier-Pelle establishes the Condé family’s patronage of innovative artists at this critical juncture in the evolution of the rococo style, yet she does not offer any speculative interpretation for the commission. In fact, Prince Louis Henri had been head of the Regency Council during the minority of his cousin, the young Louis XV, but he was disgraced and then exiled to his estates at Chantilly. The historical facts are buried in the text, leaving the reader to infer that satirical *singeries* may have served as powerful political metaphors. Katie Scott’s incisive analysis of the now lost decorative cycle at La Muette suggests an alternative methodology that validates the possibility of political analysis: “Chinese exotica played a role in the formation of new identities in a post-absolutist world.”[3]

It seems that Garnier-Pelle’s primary intention is to establish a broad historical narrative for Christophe Huet’s career. The author’s archival knowledge and connoisseurship come to the fore when she turns to the issues of attribution and the dating of the Chantilly *singeries*. Garnier-Pelle

reports that, “strangely, there is very little historical information about these interiors,” and explains that Chantilly no longer possesses the accounts of the princes de Condé for this period. She emphasizes that it is highly unlikely that any document will surface “that will irrefutably indicate the artist and the dates of the two *singeries* at Chantilly” (p. 27). Nonetheless, Garnier-Pelle endorses Bruno Pons’ hypothesis that the *singeries* were painted almost twenty years after the installation of the *boiseries*: the *Petite Singerie* in 1735 and the *Grande Singerie* in 1737, as revealed by dates on the panels discovered following restorations in 1994 and 2008.

The following section is dedicated to Huet’s biography, the first attempt to study Huet’s works since the early twentieth century, which is confirmed by the comprehensive yet predominantly French bibliography. Born into a family of painters, Huet was active in the Academy of Saint Luke, where he exhibited animal subjects. Huet’s known animal paintings consist of a cycle of ten decorative canvases, five of which are signed 1735, now housed at Chantilly. Not originally intended for the château, these panels were installed under the direction of the Duc d’Aumale in the nineteenth century. Huet depicted animals in a recognizably French landscape mingled with fantasies of the Far East where hunting dogs cohabit with exotic birds such as Canadian geese and macaws. Clearly the exotic birds were copied either from the menagerie at Chantilly or at Versailles, yet Garnier-Pelle does not speculate on the potential meanings of these hybrid landscapes. Garnier-Pelle reviews attributions to Huet, rejecting the National Gallery of Art panels in the Widener collection from his *oeuvre*, but insisting that four panels of *turqueries*, (Birmingham, Alabama) were the stylistic precursors to the Chantilly *singeries*.

The description of the *Grande Singerie* is disappointing in several respects. First, the illustrations do not do justice to Huet’s exquisite paintings. Rather, the central panels and the *lambris* are photographed from afar, so that the reader cannot decipher the brushstrokes, details, nor the iconography of each panel.^[4] The text rarely turns to the interplay of sculpted décor in Huet’s painted arabesques. The subtle interweaving of painted scrollwork that springs from the sculpted ornament creates a frame for the allegorical representations that is masterful. Huet creates spatial illusions that are enchanting. His painted bands culminate in gilded scrolls which create a baseline for the figural compositions. The seated figures are placed on illusionistic plinths where translucent draperies overlap with the arabesques, further highlighting the perspective. Pairs of monkeys, dressed in Condé family livery, share the central arabesque, serving the human figures, their poses and gestures enlivening the space, heightening the illusionism, and begging for interpretation. The upper third of each panel is intertwined with trophies that hang like swings, thus accentuating the spatial envelope around the allegorical figures. At the upper edge of the panels, Huet delicately calibrated his observations of nature—flowers, animals, and trees—to the sculpted, gilded rocaille ornament.

Although the author discusses the panels from left to right around the room, the lack of a programmatic diagram prevents the reader from appreciating the complexity of the décor that, after all, exists *in situ*. Instead, the text reads as a list of attributes rather than a presentation of a coherent program. For example, Garnier-Pelle summarizes: “This teeming, complex décor also evokes the five senses—even though there are six panels For taste we have the panel in which the Chinese figure swings in the hammock, in the lower part, there is a silver tea service and, below it a chocolate pot” (p. 58). However, there is no mention of the infiltration of these exotic beverages as fashionable commodities that could also have been interpreted as a pun on “good” taste.

Further iconographic clues can be located in the allegorical figures depicting the four parts of the world in grisaille medallions inserted in the *boiseries* which alternate with depictions of the four seasons. The portrayal of an alchemist monkey may be a reference to the Prince himself, since the depiction of natural history specimens and Chinese vases as an illusionistic screen behind the monkey allude to the Prince’s own collections. Moreover, below the alchemist monkey panel, a squirrel sits atop a paper money press, which may allude to the Prince’s highly successful speculation in John Law’s financial system. This tantalizing link to paper money will perhaps inspire economic historians to reconsider this erudite display of the Condé fortune.

The description of the upper frieze is similarly minimalist: Huet's dressed monkeys jump from fanciful arabesque scrolls hunting graceful animals. Here it would have been useful to compare the keenly observed and lively animals to Huet's large-scale animal paintings mentioned above, which are located in the adjacent room. The Prince's extensive natural history cabinet, also located in the enfilade to the *Grande Singerie*, must have inspired the hunting scenes. The detailed renderings of *naturalia* throughout the decorative cycle offer historians of science an opportunity to assess the aestheticization of the curiosity cabinet in the eighteenth-century.^[5]

Garnier-Pelle definitively attributes the *Petite Singerie* to Huet, yet once again, a diagram would have helped to decipher the space and elucidate the program. The full-page illustrations provide a wealth of information for those interested in material culture. The sitting room, designed for the Prince de Condé's second wife (Landgravine Caroline of Hesse-Rotenburg), shows female monkeys enacting some of the most endearing scenes of aristocratic female society. Like the *Grande Singerie*, the six scenes in the lower apartment also depict the four seasons. Autumn is represented by a hunting picnic, where monkeys dressed in the Condé equestrian hunting colors are shown on horseback in the forest of Chantilly. Spring is evoked by a female monkey picking cherries accompanied by a seated monkey who enjoys a bowl of cream underneath the cherry tree. Here the full page illustration captures not only the charm of pastoral pleasures, but one can admire the detailed string of pearls that adorns the seated monkey's neck! For summer, a bathing scene, a female monkey dressed in a bathing robe, accompanied by her lady in waiting, kicks off her red high heeled shoe in order to enter the bathtub. A card game, perhaps also indicating summer, is convincingly staged in a sumptuous interior. Winter is illustrated by sleigh riding presumably on the Grand Canal at Chantilly. In the sixth panel, a monkey is shown at her dressing table, where Huet inserted a faux Chinese screen behind her, thus mocking his own creative designs. The illustrations of the ceiling and medallions of the *Petite Singerie* do provide the opportunity to study the delicate brushwork, yet unlike the hunting scenes of the upper chamber, here the ceiling, the frieze, as well as shutters and medallions, all indicate the significance of play and gaming, themes that surely underline the pleasure of caricature that pervade this magical space.

Although the Chantilly *singeries* comprise the central section of the book, Garnier-Pelle provides an overview of the two other *in situ* cycles attributed to Huet commissioned by François Armande de Rohan (1717-1756), Cardinal de Soubise at the Hôtel de Rohan Soubise, Paris (1749-1752), and by Louis-César, Duc de la Vallière, Duc de Vaujour at Champs-sur-Marne (1748-49), further establishing Huet's seminal role as master of *chinoiserie* and *singerie* decoration at mid-century. As at Chantilly, preexisting *boiseries* were embellished by Huet's now highly fashionable scenes. Each of his decorative cycles merit individual scholarly analysis, but the tenor of the entire text privileges connoisseurship. Similarly, a short section on prints after Huet's designs only hints at the issues surrounding the dissemination of his works.

Marie Christine Anselm's chapter, *Animals in the Drawing Room: Decoration of the Harpsichord at Thoiry*, discusses the unusual place of the harpsichord in the decorative arts when she states "[t]hese musical instruments played an important role in the décor as furniture capable of adapting to trends in fashion ... the association of singing or talking birds with monkey musicians was thus symbolically fitting for this decorative mission" (pp. 125-126). As we now can surmise, Huet's imagination was well suited to the harpsichord, where he joined a country concert of musical monkeys, with dressed simians who aped theatrical characters and engaged in *pas-de-deux* dances, with birds whose natural songs were associated with music that emanated from that instrument.

Anne Forray-Carlier's final chapter, *The Monkey in the Decorative Arts*, returns to an overview of monkeys as subjects in tapestries, faience pottery, gilt bronze (ormolu), and porcelains. Forray-Carlier mentions a number of works, and the chapter reads as a series of lists. Disappointingly, only a few illustrations complement her text. When the author does turn to a specific piece, such as a *Female Monkey Teapot*, (Meissen, 1735), her interpretation suggests the rich possibilities for iconographic interpretation: "The application of animal morphology to a piece of crockery was nothing new *per se*, but here its significance is enhanced when we recall that since the Middle Ages, the monkey had been associated with the sense of taste" (p. 153). In keeping with the overall theme of

the book, Carlier-Foray suggests that engravings after Huet's compositions by Guélard, *Singeries ou différentes actions de la vie humaine, représentées par les singes* (1741), perpetuated the dissemination of his designs for the decorative arts.

In this lavishly illustrated monographic study, the apparent editorial mission to appeal to a large public eclipses the scholarly one, but perhaps the popularity of the subject will lead to a more sustained analysis that would interest a wide range of eighteenth-century scholars.

NOTES

[1] Alain Gruber, ed. *L'Art décoratif en Europe*, vol. 2, *Classique et Baroque* (Paris: Citadelles et Mazenod, 1992). See especially the section by Bruno Pons, "Les Arabesques ou Nouvelles Grotesques," pp. 157-173, 209. David L. Porter, "Eighteenth-Century Fashion and the Aesthetics of Chinese Taste," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35 (Spring 2002): 395-411, provides another methodological model for the interpretation of contemporary British taste for *chinoiserie*.

[2] The recent exhibition and catalogue, *Singes et Dragons: La Chine et le Japon à Chantilly au XVIIIe siècle*, 14 septembre 2011-1 janvier, 2012, edited by Manuela Finaz de Villaine (Chantilly: Institut de France, Domaine de Chantilly, 2012) provides more detailed information about the porcelain manufacture and links the collection to Huet's *Grande Singerie*.

[3] Katie Scott, "Playing Games with Otherness: Watteau's Chinese Cabinet at the Château de la Muette," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 66 (2003): 189-248.

[4] Nicole Garnier-Pelle, *Les Singeries*, Fondation for the Domaine de Chantilly, (Chantilly: Nicolas Chaudun, 2008), offers a brief yet incisive analysis of the *Grande Singerie*, linking the representations of the five senses and the seasons to allegories of science and the arts—painting, sculpture, geometry, geography and chemistry—all of which are represented as monkeys on the Chantilly panels, doors, and window shutters.

[5] On the interplay between natural history cabinets and decoration see Katie Scott, *The Rococo Interior: Decoration and Social Spaces in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris*, (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 166-176.

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