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Peter Fuhring, Louis Marchesano, Rémi Mathis, and Vanessa Selbach, eds., *A Kingdom of Images: French Prints in the Age of Louis XIV, 1660-1715*, exhibition catalogue. The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2015, xi + 332 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. (hb). \$80.00 U.S. ISBN 978-2-7177-2663-3.

Review by Carl Goldstein, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

It would be difficult to conceive of a more famous ruler than Louis XIV. The reasons are obvious. France became a dominant military and economic power in Europe during his reign. By means of his policies, crafts such as tapestry design and production and furniture design and manufacture were raised to hitherto unimagined heights of elegance and refinement synonymous with *le style Louis XIV*. The academy of painting and sculpture that he sponsored became the envy of artists from Rome to Saint Petersburg to Philadelphia, all channeled into the palace at Versailles, the most stunning seat of political and cultural authority ever created and one emulated by rulers ever since. Who today is not familiar with this legacy? Who is not on intimate terms with the chateau at Versailles and its contents, open to one and all through the mass media and virtual tours? Before the advent of modern media, of photography and film, before the electronic age, however, there was only one means of access to these works apart from physical presence: printed images. Single-sheet prints did the work of today's mass and electronic media.

These prints were invariably produced using intaglio techniques, engraving or etching, or a combination of the two. As explained by Vanessa Selbach in her catalogue essay, an engraving is produced by cutting directly into a metal plate, usually copper, with a specially designed burin. The lines so incised will in due course be transferred under pressure to a sheet of paper in a process that can be repeated as many times as seems commercially warranted. An etching is similarly printed, though the lines are not cut directly but rather by means of acid biting the exposed plate as its protective varnish is removed through the actions of a drawing needle. Innovations in this technique by French printmakers during this period, combining the ease of etching with the greater strength and permanence of engraving, helped to launch a revolution in printmaking that spread the fame of French printmakers and printmaking far and wide. These prints were of two kinds: "original" images produced from start to finish by a single printmaker, or reproductions of works in other media, especially paintings and sculptures, the second typically carrying associations and allusions to the king. Significantly, unlike paintings, the image was accompanied by an inscription, often in more than one language.

This highly organized and cumulative enterprise is detailed in the catalogue essay by Rémi Mathis, "What is a Printmaker?" Printmaking was a specialty different from the other arts and was often passed down in families over many generations. It was freer, too, professionally, legally, and socially, and not subject to the same controls and restrictions as the traditional arts and crafts. As a result prints were as various as the circumstances that led to their production, among them most importantly royal commissions for reproductions of paintings in the *Cabinet du Roi*, of the decorations at Versailles glorifying the king, and as more literal images of the king and his family. This project was the one

famously called by Peter Burke the “fabrication of Louis XIV,” echoed in the catalogue essays by Thomas W. Gaehtgens and Maxime Préaud.<sup>[1]</sup> “From the very beginning of Louis’ reign,” Préaud notes, “he fully recognized that images had the power to shape perception” (p. 9). The proof is in the contents of this exhibition.

The most obvious such images are portraits of the king reproduced from the first pages of the catalogue. Equally important print vehicles incorporating images of the king and his family were the ever-popular almanacs and university theses and an endless array of images celebrating his military victories and cultural interventions, at times directly, others by means of complex allegories. An overlapping category comprises images of the palace at Versailles, as a whole and in its parts, as well as other major architectural projects. Related to these are prints disseminating accomplishments in the decorative arts, furniture design, tapestries, etc., and of paintings and sculptures of historical and mythological subjects implicitly celebrating the king. Most important among these are the unusually large reproductive prints after paintings by Charles Le Brun that were the subject of an earlier Getty exhibition and catalogue and to which Louis Marchesano returns in his essay in the present catalogue, focusing on the two most important of these reproductive printmakers, Girard Audran and Gérard Edelinck.<sup>[2]</sup>

Such images directly engage official doctrine. The market for prints was not dependent on royal patronage, but it was, as it were, unbounded. As Peter Fuhring notes in his catalogue essay (“Publishers, Sellers, and the Market”) and Véronique Meyer in hers (“Collectors and Collecting Prints”), the larger profession of printmaking was controlled by independent entrepreneurs who saw no limit to the ways in which they might profit from printed images appealing to the interests and tastes of the widest possible publics at home and abroad. To reach these publics, they disseminated advertisements and lists including subjects of a great variety, some seeming indeed to subvert and ironize official doctrine. What mattered was commercial profitability, not “artistic” merit or formal approval.

There are numerous such works in the present exhibition. First, not surprisingly, are religious subjects such as had comprised the bulk of printed images from the beginnings of printmaking. A second large category collects images of “popular” subjects, here presented under the rubric, “human nature.” The images are of street vendors, current fashions, and, most of all, what are identified in the catalogue as carriers of moral messages: the timeless *memento mori*, the Ages of Man, “battle” of the sexes, etc. Brought home by these images is the importance of viewing printmaking under Louis XIV, not in terms of official versus unofficial images, but as rooted in one and the same print culture. An experienced viewer/reader would have been equipped with the knowledge necessary to decode images of many different kinds, scenes of everyday life no less than images of the king. Or, to put it another way, prints provide an even greater entry into the world of Louis XIV than one would have thought.

Printmaking has been largely overlooked by the scholarly community until fairly recently, perhaps for being too commercial, perhaps not “artistic” in the sense of painting. As its importance has been recognized, attention has come to be focused on leading printmakers and print traditions, which in this country has meant principally the Italian and Northern traditions, documented in eye-opening exhibitions at the National Gallery, Washington, D.C. The only significant exhibition in this country devoted to French printmaking was the 1998 *French Prints from the Age of the Musketeers*, that is Louis XIII, organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. *A Kingdom of Images* is, then, a landmark project, as, too, its 2010 Getty predecessor, *Printing the Grand Manner*. To be sure, the French tradition has come in for attention, but principally through exhibitions at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, which is sharing the present exhibition with the Getty. This is only one of a whole series of exhibitions of seventeenth-century French printmaking at the Bibliothèque Nationale and other venues in France. Others have been of leading French printmakers such as Claude Mellan and Abraham Bosse. It is to be hoped that there will be future such exhibitions, in the U.S. as well as France, throwing further light on this great tradition of printmaking.

## NOTES

[1] Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

[2] Louis Marchesano and Christian Michel, eds., *Printing the Grand Manner: Charles le Brun and Monumental Prints in the Age of Louis XIV*, , exhibition catalogue. The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2010.

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