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Guillaume Faroult, Monica Preti, and Christoph Vogtherr, eds. *Delicious Decadence: The Rediscovery of French Eighteenth-Century Painting in the Nineteenth Century*. Ashgate: Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, Vermont, 2014. 210 pages; Exhibition listing, Bibliography, Index of names, and 16 color and 24 b&w illustrations. \$99.95 U.S. ISBN: 978-1-4724-4921-4; Short ISBN: 9781472449214.

Reviewed by Cordula Grewe, University of Pennsylvania.

The name Goncourt has become synonymous with the mid-nineteenth-century rediscovery of the art of the age of Louis XV. The title of the current volume testifies to the enduring seminal role of Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, and is taken from the brothers' characterization of Boucher as "delicious decadence." Yet, the battle for the rediscovery of eighteenth-century French art had already been won by the time the Goncourts embarked on their major work *L'art du dix-huitième siècle* in 1859. And it had been won not by art historians but by critics, curators, and, most importantly, collectors. Two of the key players were Louis La Caze (1796-1869) and Richard Seymour-Conway, 4th Marquess of Hertford (1800-1870), whose collecting activities would acquire an enduring influence on the canonization of French eighteenth-century art when given their respective nations. As a result, the Louvre in Paris and the Wallace Collection in London became among the richest collections of French eighteenth-century art worldwide, rivaled perhaps only by Berlin with the magnificent holdings amassed by Frederick the Great (1712-1786). However, these prominent cases should not eclipse the role of other actors, many of them provincial, and it is one of the declared goals of this essay collection to unearth the contributions of these less profiled collectors and to map out the complex international networks involved in the rediscovery under investigation. This entails shedding light not only on the economic realities of the new art market, both capitalist and international, but also on the social and political dimensions of nineteenth-century attitudes toward eighteenth-century art.

Originally delivered at an international conference at London's Wallace Collection in May 2008, the ten tightly-focused essays position themselves at the nexus of a continuing interest in the history of collecting and an equally robust surge of new scholarship on the era of Louis XV. As such, the volume explores the contribution of the nineteenth century to shaping the legacy of this period, and in so doing pursues four propositions: First, there is ample evidence that the "rediscovery" of French eighteenth-century painting was much less abrupt or surprising than traditionally proposed, and could more aptly be described as a process of continuations and reinterpretations rather than rupture; second, a fundamental shift occurred from a connoisseurial appreciation to a nostalgic love for the *ancien régime*, a new vision of a lost ideal and changed aesthetic values or, to put it differently, a kind of backward-looking utopia of a pre-revolutionary Golden Age, which proved equally attractive for liberals and reactionaries; third, the rise of art-historical analysis forms a late chapter in a story first dominated by critics, who themselves were often composite actors, "at once artists, art dealers, writers on art" (p. 14), and in the beginning driven by exhibitions, which, creating a new public, were often connected to sales, not scholarship; fourth, the nineteenth-century obsession with national identity, which entailed changing evaluations of "Frenchness," was a key factor in the scholarly debates, critical assessments and the fluctuating popularity of French eighteenth-century art on either side of the Channel.

In her introductory notes, Monica Preti returns to the quote that inspired the volume's title, the 1862 riff of the Goncourt brothers on Boucher as "Decadence. Delicious Decadence," and takes it as her clue to explore the changing meaning of the term "decadence." Emerging as a critical category in the aesthetic debates during the second half of the eighteenth century, the term underwent a profound reassessment from reprobation to a principle of delight, which leads Preti to the observation that "the renewed interest in this kind of painting did not exonerate it from the accusation of 'decadence;' rather, the word changed meaning, and it was through this metamorphosis that Watteau's art was joined up with the spirit of the time" (p. 6). Discussing the shifting critical categories and trends in the historiography from Seroux d'Agincourt to Jean Joseph Taillasson, Preti links the rehabilitation of French eighteenth-century art to its profound re-reading in terms of aesthetic modernity. Preti's observation highlights the analogies between the nineteenth-century "rediscovery" of eighteenth-century art to its twenty-first-century version equally marked by a burning desire to draw out the modernity of this penultimate aristocratic art form. Presenting her findings as "a few notes for possible research," Preti does not fathom the larger implications of her argument for the current practice of art history and historiography, and instead ends by leaving the field to those examining the "little-known rich context of provincial collectors and artists" (p. 16).

Marie-Martine Dubreuil's essay follows this call. It provides a materially rich overview of the various sales, price developments, and marketing strategies in France between 1830 and 1860. Her account drives home the vital role of economics, beginning with the stifling effect of a difficult economic climate at the turn of the century on sales, criticism, and even art historical accounts. Tracing the arc from "The Rediscovery (of the Eighteenth-Century French School)" in the 1820s to its "Consecration" in the 1850s, Dubreuil not only shows that stylistic affinities could override, as in the case of the French Romantics, questions of historical socio-political affiliations, namely the art's original aristocratic and thus conservative inflections; she also illustrates how indispensable it is to understand the material side of the so-called rediscovery of French eighteenth-century painting.

Taking up the volume's core theme of rediscovery as a product of reinterpretation, Guillaume Faroult sets out to deconstruct the deeply ingrained view of Watteau and Chardin as the two poles of eighteenth-century art, here poetry and the elite, there reality and the popular, here the object of aristocratic nostalgia for Restoration and later the July Monarchy, that is, an idol of nostalgic reactionaries of the Right, there the hero of the socialist upsurge of 1840 and emblem of the progressive Left. As Faroult convincingly claims, this view is too monolithic, and for his revisionist account he calls upon Théophile Thoré, to many better known as W. Bürger, who as early as 1860 emphasized the communalities of these two artists "who are perhaps the most truly *painters* of the entire French school" (p. 30). Challenging the notion of a progressive rediscovery of Watteau and Chardin, Faroult also challenges the view of these two--canonized by the Goncourts in 1860s--as oppositions. Watteau only became the painter of poetry, philosophy, and melancholy, of a profound capacity of reflection and intellectual dignity in the hands of the Romantics, Faroult asserts, while earlier generations had considered him spontaneous rather than cerebral. Likewise, Chardin was less rediscovered in 1845-46, as claimed by Pierre Rosenberg, than re-invented. After all, both were among the very few artists exhibited without interruption at the Louvre from 1799 onward. When the Goncourts then lifted Watteau and Chardin into the lofty spheres of "Art" in the 1860s, they established a view persistent until the 1970s. "Watteau no longer served the technical innovations of the Romantics, nor Chardin the aspirations of the realists. Thereafter a certain 'beatified' version [reigned]: formalist, literary, willfully depoliticized, where nature and ideal sit side by side without opposition" (p. 42).

With Jon Whiteley's essay, we sail across the Channel to England, which, as is often said, rediscovered eighteenth-century French art long before it had returned to fashion in France. Yet this is only partly true, Whiteley alerts us, as the flourishing export of artists like Watteau had less to do with an unpopularity at home than the more lucrative nature of the British market. Once again, not a revival but a survival of taste was responsible for British interest in Watteau, Greuze, and Joseph Vernet, a taste

also marked by a thoroughly eighteenth-century combination of eighteenth-century French painting with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish art. Acknowledging that a new kind of collection arose in the 1830s, which added Nattier, Drouais, Vanloos, and the ever-scandalous Boucher to the trio above, Whiteley focuses on the role of Sèvres porcelain, which by the 1840s had become a defining feature of any British collection including paintings from the age of Louis XV. His key example is the dazzling figure of Henry Broadwood, a London socialite and staple of the Parisian scene, who, living grand with even grander debts, embodies the prototype of the period's avid collector of eighteenth-century painting and porcelain. Like Whiteley's other main players, Ralph Bernal and William Lowther, the 2nd Earl of Lonsdale, Broadwood "belonged to a group of wealthy extravagant and ambitious politicians who filled their London houses with works of art" (p. 56). As such, these men were archetypes of the early British collector of eighteenth-century French art, "men of wealth some of whom, at least, seem to have preferred the applied arts to paintings, liked portraits because they were attracted by the sitters and admired the art of Boucher chiefly because they admired the artefacts of his time--and the work of the Sèvres factory in particular--even more" (p. 58).

The next contribution changes gear, not only because Frances Fowle takes us to Scotland but also because she focuses on another crucial aspect of the volume's "rediscovery" story, namely, the tenacious aversion to "the elegant depravity and irresponsible ... gaiety" of the Rococo period, a persistence vividly illustrated by that fact that the director of the National Gallery of Scotland uttered this damning judgment as late as 1908 (p. 61). Choosing the German art historian Georg Friedrich Waagen (1797-1868) as her travel companion to tour the most eminent Scottish collections of the period, she notes a striking dearth of eighteenth-century French painting spurned by the Presbyterian Scots for its frivolity, in particular of a Boucher or Fragonard. The remarkable exception was the Edinburgh collection of Lord Murray of Henderland bequeathed to the National Gallery in 1861. It is not without irony then that this generous gesture secured the Scottish National Gallery a collection of notable breadth and significance, which it, like its audience, looked upon for many decades to come with suspicion at best and disgust at worst.

Turning to the politics of taste, Francis Suzman Jowell's inspired essay does not only remind us of the importance of specific exhibitions, in this case an exhibition of privately owned French old masters dating mostly from the eighteenth century, which opened at the Galerie Martinet in Paris in July of 1860. It also unpacks the political implications of collecting and art criticism. Using the example of the aforementioned left-wing art critic and political journalist Theophile Thoré, who would adopt the pen name W. Bürger in exile, she draws attention to the rather unexpected fusion of progressive political views with a championship for French eighteenth-century art. Dismissing the great heroes of the French academy, Poussin and Claude, as mere Italian accolades, Thoré-Bürger located the rise of a true French school at the end of the reign of Louis XIV. His quest for French national identity thus overrode the political affiliations of this art with a political system he despised, and soon his re-reading would gain further momentum through a new appreciation of spontaneous procedure, bold brushwork, and improvisatory technique in painting.

The Galerie Martinet exhibition of 1860 is also the springboard for Pauline Prévost-Marcilhacy's investigation of the seductive marriage of economic and charitable interests, sales tactics and the promotion of a broadening artistic taste, which, parallel to the realities in Great Britain as explored by Whiteley, provided the opportunity for French collectors with political offices or ambitions to profile themselves. The new collections of French eighteenth-century art thus fulfilled, as the duc de Morny's so strikingly illustrates, two functions; they were simultaneously instruments of power--whether in political terms or in terms of social prestige--and investments. The 1860 show at the Galerie Martinet indeed became an important turning point in both areas, for one, on a speculative level, with new collectors entering the market of eighteenth-century art, on the other hand on a political level, with the entourage of Napoleon III getting involved in the new craze of collecting. Prévost-Marcilhacy concludes her essay by laying out the research agenda that both of these factors need to be taken into

account in any future assessment of the collecting activities of Napoleon III, the Empress, and those near the center of power.

Christoph Martin Vogtherr now picks up these various interpretive threads, and weaves them together in an ambitious essay, which once again drives home how strongly politics could shape perception, even down to matters of attribution. Beyond this, however, he demonstrates the profound implications of nineteenth-century debates about eighteenth-century art for the formation of art history as a discipline. In so doing, he makes a powerful claim for Berlin as one of the key players in the realm of French eighteenth-century art, both through the magnificent collection of Frederick the Great and through the ambitious and advanced methodology of leading German scholars, who modernized the understanding of their eighteenth-century material by applying, from the 1870s onward, “the new critical art-historical paradigms” (p. 102). Many of Vogtherr’s key actors will be unknown to an English-speaking audience, like the aforementioned Waagen or Robert Dohme, who took up the research interests of the Goncourt brothers but with the rigorous methodology of critical art history and knowledge of the important Berlin collections missing from the latter’s 1875 account of Watteau. The result was an article on the literature about Antoine Watteau, published in 1876, which Vogtherr characterizes in no uncertain terms as “truly groundbreaking” (p. 106). In 1883, another exhibition, this time of old master paintings from the Berlin private collections, would then become a watershed in the scholarship on (and international acclaim of) the Prussian collections of French eighteenth-century art, and in turn transform them into suitable diplomatic currency in the new market of international loan exhibitions. From now on Berlin was a center of interest in French eighteenth-century painting only comparable to Paris. This, however, is not the end of Vogtherr’s rich and enriching discussion. The second part of his essay is dedicated to an art-historical debate surrounding Watteau’s now canonical *L’Enseigne de Gersaint*, its history, attribution, and place within the artist’s oeuvre. The heated back and forth between German and French scholars is but one particularly glaring example of how quickly serious scholarly discussion could descend into an arena of nationalist rivalry and pride, and one can only shake one’s head in light of the obvious flaws in the arguments of the participating French art historians, who tried to “repatriate” Watteau’s masterpiece by claiming another version in the possession of a Michel Lévy to be the original. Ultimately, the *Shopsign* controversy became an important testing ground for the new methodologies from stylistic analysis and the autopsy of material evidence to provenance and the relationship of painting to print culture.

While the legacy of Frederick the Great left Berlin with little to worry about their standing in the field of French eighteenth-century painting, London was not so fortunate. And not just that! “How is one to explain the fact,” Humphrey Wine asks poignantly, “that following its foundation in 1824, it was not until 1897 that the [National Gallery in London] bought its first eighteenth-century French painting?” (p. 122). The answer is simple yet powerful and recalls Fowle’s analysis of Scottish taste: Between 1855-1898 none of the Gallery’s keepers favored French eighteenth-century art and just did not buy available examples, and when condescension finally softened, the market had become more challenging and high-end pieces less affordable. Another excuse for the negligence to fill the glaring gap in the national collection were hopes that the amazing collection put together by the 4th Marquess of Hertford and later his son, Sir Richard Wallace, would go to the British nation, a hope that ultimately came true and created an enchanting house museum perceived by most as a satellite of the National Gallery.

The Wallace collection’s uniqueness and prominence in England, which expands beyond its focus on French eighteenth-century art, brings us to Stephen Duffy’s final question about the role it played in shaping British taste after it opened as a public museum on June 22, 1900. Expectations ran high; after all, the Wallace collection was the first of its kind in Great Britain that, available in London as part of the national patrimony, could rival in breadth and quality Paris and Berlin, providing broad audiences with access to something that so far had been the exclusive preserve of the wealthy and cultured elite. Moreover, the pleasure-loving Edwardian age now embraced what the stern Victorians had to reject on moral and aesthetic grounds, although they, like their ancestors, remained of the opinion that the

French under Louis XV had preferred the pretty to the profound. Despite these promising changes, Duffy comes to the sobering conclusion that the Wallace collection might have exerted its largest influence before it went public, and that its opening had ultimately little true impact on the growing taste for French eighteenth-century painting or British collecting habits and, more broadly, general attitudes. If anything, the shameless exuberance of the Wallace's Bouchers and Fragonards only confirmed existing prejudices, and Duffy wraps up the volume with the poignant and exasperated observation, "The belief in England that France before the Revolution got the art it deserved will probably never die" (p. 156).

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