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Florian Knothe, *The Manufacture des meubles de la couronne aux Gobelins under Louis XIV*. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2016. 290 pp. Illustrations (150 b/w; 32 colour). €150.00. (hb). ISBN 978-2-503-55320-7

Florian Knothe, *Classic Furniture: Craftsmanship, Trade Organisations and Cross-Cultural Influences in East and West*. Hong Kong: University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong, 2017. 66 pp. \$18.00/£14.95. (pb). ISBN 9789881902399

Review by Robert Wellington, Australian National University.

The reason why the French became the taste-makers of Europe in the long eighteenth century can be traced back to the cultural and economic policies instigated by Louis XIV's most able minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert in the early 1660s. By the end of the seventeenth century, the works of art (paintings, sculptures, furniture, carpets, tapestries and much more besides) made to decorate the houses of the nobility and wealthy elites were the envy of Europe, and emulated widely. Until recently, studies of the fine and decorative arts of France from that period have concentrated on the innovations of individual designers and makers. Two recent publications by Florian Knothe, director of the University Museum and Art Gallery at the University of Hong Kong, uncover the social and commercial networks of artistic collaboration that informed the Louis Quatorze and Louis Quinze styles.

Knothe's books come at an exciting time for the study of the material culture of early modern France in the anglophone academy. The French-language literature on this topic is ever-increasing, often appearing as catalogues to accompany major exhibitions at the Louvre, Versailles, or the Mobilier National. The public museum of the latter institution is based at the site of Louis XIV's Gobelins Manufactory in the thirteenth arrondissement of Paris—the setting for Knothe's impressive monograph published by Brepols in 2016.

Knothe's richly illustrated book on the Gobelins Manufactory is grounded in deep archival research and casts new light on this centre of artistic production, best known for the fine tapestries produced there. Indeed, this place is so much equated with those elaborately loomed textiles, that tapestries are often called 'gobelins,' just as vacuum cleaners are called 'hoovers' in Britain after the popular brand that once dominated the market. Knothe's study reminds us that the Gobelins Manufactory was much more than a group of tapestry workshops—it was a dynamic creative hub that brought together French, Italian and Flemish painters, designers, printmakers, cabinetmakers, tapestry-weavers, and lapidaries within a single complex. Drawing together these skilled designers and makers to form a unified artistic community, Knothe argues, inspired collaborative production with a "homogeneity of style" that left its mark on the aesthetic of French furniture for generations to come (p. 49).

The Gobelins Manufactory is described in this study as a colony of *artisans du roi*, connected by social and familial ties. These artisan families were linked not only through their work, but by dynastic marriages and other forms of social patronage, such as the witnessing of those marriages, and the naming of godparents for the children born of them. Knothe's careful articulation of this community

brings a new perspective to the objects produced in the "Louis XIV style" under the direction of *premier peintre du roi*, Charles Le Brun. This fascinating social history goes against the grain of the commonly-held notion, espoused by Anthony Blunt, of Le Brun as 'a dictator of the arts in France,' whose designs formed a pattern for Gobelins production that stifled the artistic agency of that vast community of artisans.[1] Instead, Knothe shows that the lavish furnishing for royal palaces, made to celebrate the fecundity of Bourbon rule, were the products of collaborative processes formed within a complex social network.

If the Louvre was the primary centre of artistic production and training in Paris in the seventeenth century, this book shows that the Gobelins Manufactory was a close second. Knothe provides a much-needed account of this alternative site of artistic training. To be sure, the Gobelins was not an academy. There were no lectures on theoretical aspects of image-making, as there were in the lectures at the *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*. But there were schools for literacy and drawing classes to supplement the system of workshop apprenticeships through which successive generations would perfect their metiers. The spiritual welfare of the workers, their children and their apprentices was catered for too, with religious instruction provided by a Catholic clergyman. It may come as a surprise to many readers that the Sun King, a militant defender of Catholicism, paid a Protestant minister to conduct church services for the Flemish artisans who followed that faith. Details such as these are what make Knothe's research so compelling, by providing a sophisticated and balanced view of the life of artisans during the glory years of the Louis XIV's reign.

The case studies of tapestries, silver furniture and collaborations between *ebenistes* and lapidaries to make wooden furniture with *pietra dura* panels presented in the third section of this book are extremely instructive, addressing a noticeable gap in the literature of this period. The little that has been published on these things is mostly in French, and much of it the work of the formidable Stéphane Castelluccio (Centre André Chastel, Paris). Knothe's publication makes this material accessible to a new audience and will be of particular value to undergraduates in Anglophone universities.

This study, quite rightly, affirms the traditional view that the tapestries, silver furniture and other luxury objects produced at the Gobelins were part of a broad (and ultimately successful) plan to use the arts as a vehicle for the political ambitions of Louis XIV—a project championed by Colbert. To reflect this, the author titles that section of his book, "The Gobelins' role in producing propaganda and its contribution to the formulation of a 'European' style." Here, he follows a tradition of using the term "propaganda" to describe the function of the Sun King's artistic patronage, but it is not a term that I find to be wholly satisfactory for an account of Colbert's project.[2]

When the word "propaganda" first appeared in the early seventeenth century, it was used in relation to the propagation of religious teachings.[3] Not until the twentieth century did it take on the more sinister connotations of material informed by political ideology designed to persuade a politicised public. When Louis XIV and his ministers wrote to each other and to the savants of the Académie Royale des Inscriptions (known as the Petite Académie) about the function of these royal commissions, the word that they used was *gloire*. The literal translation of this word to English, "glory," does not quite capture its nuance; it also carries connotations of fame and posterity. It might seem strange to us, but one of the most enduring concerns of the French king was his posthumous reputation.[4] Many of the objects made at the Gobelins Manufactory and elsewhere were designed to carry details of the Sun King's glorious reign into the future, long after they could influence the politics of the time in which they were commissioned.

Colbert's project to make France a centre for the arts and the manufacturing of luxury goods was not a successful campaign of political propaganda that resulted in unyielding support for Louis XIV's rule. On the contrary, the king's bellicose foreign policy and unbending religious militancy would alienate him from much of Europe towards the end of his reign. In spite of that, Knothe reveals that the tapestries and furniture produced at the Gobelins Manufactory became the height of fashion and even Louis XIV's

enemies would commission counterfeit copies of Le Brun's tapestry designs.[5] As evidence, the chapters in the last section of this book are dedicated to the work of French artists, designers and artisans patronised by Swedish king, Charles XI. On the advice of his superintendent of buildings, Nicodemus Tessin, Charles XI brought René Chauveau, a man from a prominent family of artists working at the Gobelins, to Stockholm to help design a palace for him that emulated the Louis XIV style. The designs of the French artist would be supplemented with imported tapestries made by weavers with Gobelins credentials. At the Gobelins Manufactory, a new international style was formed collaboratively by French and European émigré artists that was emulated across the world.

Knothe's short comparative study of French and Chinese furniture in the eighteenth century forms an excellent counterpart to his more comprehensive book on the Gobelins Manufactory under Louis XIV. The first of five short essays provides an introduction to furniture produced in China during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The subsequent essays are dedicated to the French, English and German furniture that was inspired by, and often physically incorporated, them when they were imported into Europe. The chapter dedicated to the "Exotic Worlds of Paris Dealers" is perhaps the most informative for a scholar of French decorative arts, and it forms an interesting counterpoint to the production of furniture in the royal manufactories. As this very helpful chapter shows, the production of some of the most spectacular furniture in the chinoiserie style was not the work of *artisans du roi*, but of an especially enterprising species of tradesmen called the *marchands-merciers*.

The *marchands-merciers*, were, according to an entry in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopedie*, "dealers in everything--makers of nothing" (p. 29). These dealers were responsible for assembling objects from parts old and new, local and foreign, to produce a range of chic new pieces in a cohesive French Style. They would mount Chinese porcelains with new ormolu fittings, take apart old-fashioned or impractical inlaid furniture to decorate pieces in the latest style, and commission cabinets and fittings from foreign artisans who worked outside of the protection of the guilds. Where the Gobelins Manufactory had provided a community for collaborative production under the auspices of the French crown, the *marchands-merciers* were entrepreneurial facilitators--middle men responsible for assembling the work of many hands and various metiers within a single ornament or piece of furniture.

As with his study of the Gobelins Manufactory, the strength of this book is the attention it gives to the processes of furniture production in the early modern world and the many artisans often involved in making these extraordinary things. With only one of the five chapters dedicated to Chinese furniture, the reader is left wanting to know a little more about the workshop practices and methods of decorative arts production in China. No doubt this is a result of an unequal balance in archival and secondary material available for the study of Chinese furniture in comparison to that of France, England and Germany. To be sure, this study is weighted towards the European context of the importation and emulation of Chinese forms, as we might expect from a specialist in European furniture. To ask for more on the reception of European furniture and other objects in China in this same period to balance out the account would call for a book of at least twice the length. As it stands, *Classic Furniture* provides a modest contribution to the field through a series of short accessible essays on the mechanics of the chinoiserie style in Europe that will be invaluable to educators and undergraduates who are seeking a concise introduction to this topic.

Reading these two very welcome additions to the literature on early modern furniture together is a provocation to bring a critical eye to studies devoted to single artists/designers or national styles of decorative arts. Histories of furniture do not comfortably fit within traditional art-historical narratives that lionise the solitary artist genius. With émigré artists forging careers outside of their countries of birth, and the success of international trade, to speak of a distinctly French (or for that matter Chinese) style does not account for complex cross-cultural networks embodied by early modern furniture. Furniture and textile production is a complicated and technical business that necessitates the collaboration of many skilled hands. In revealing the social and marketplace dynamics of the decorative

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arts in old regime France, Knothe provides valuable insights into the complex communities of makers, merchants and networks of exchange that made France the centre for this industry.

## NOTES

[1] Anthony Blunt, *Art and Architecture in France, 1500-1700* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1953), p. 193.

[2] See for example Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992).

[3] See Erwin W. Fellows, "'Propaganda:' History of a Word," *American Speech* 34/3(October 1959): 182-189.

[4] This is the subject of my book: Robert Wellington, *Antiquarianism and the Visual Histories of Louis XIV: Artifacts for a future past* (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2015).

[5] See my article on the first Duke of Marlborough: Robert Wellington, "A Reflection of the Sun: The Duke of Marlborough in the Image of Louis XIV," *The Court Historian* 21/2(2016): 125-139.

Robert Wellington  
Australian National University  
robert.wellington@anu.edu.au

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