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Rebecca Zorach, *Blood, Milk, Ink, Gold: Abundance and Excess in the French Renaissance*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005. xvi + 243 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-98937-2.

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Readers will see and understand a profoundly revealed sixteenth century thanks to art historian Rebecca Zorach. She focuses on the art of Fontainebleau as the “crucible of the French Renaissance” and examines in detail the connections of this peculiarly French visual vocabulary with a novel range of activities. Her general topic is the changing perception of the relationship between nature and art/artifice from the late 1520s through the Valois period in domains as diverse as the production of decorative prints, religious disputes over idolatry, Italian and French aesthetic theory, debates over inflation, the natural philosophy of matter, and the status of ornament.

The themes she explores—fertility, sacrifice, and eroticism—illuminate fundamental aspects of the period that have never been gathered coherently within one conceptual framework. Her approach centers on the workings of desire and the emergence of an early consumer culture in France traced through the symbolic circulation of value. She begins with a radical reinterpretation of the iconography of Fontainebleau, establishes the far-reaching cultural significance of the style and artistic collaborations formed there, and uncovers a complex relationship between the production of royal-national identity and debates in France about the productivity of nature, of printing, and excessive fashioning in the arts. Historically convincing and theoretically rich insights manage to uncover surprising sources of commodity fetishism within aesthetic transformations. Her argument calls upon writers as diverse as Jean Bodin, Michel de Montaigne, and Bernard Palissy to demonstrate the wide resonance of anxieties in French culture over abundance, increase, quantity, and excess. This establishes the relevance of aesthetic changes to broad transformations in the economy, material culture, religious sensibilities, and in national self-perception.

The work is organized in individual chapters devoted to blood, milk, ink and gold, substances which are “metaphors for the production of value” (p. 27). “Blood” begins with Francis I’s renovation of Fontainebleau as a work of mourning and creative substitution for loss in the Italian wars. Zorach’s treatment of the Galerie François Premier revisits ancient myths, redefines the subjects in the frescoes, and, with a skillful deployment of historical detail and critical theory, establishes a new interpretation where fertility and sacrifice, production and destruction are pervasive themes in the art. “Milk,” explores the profusion of breasts in images and statues of the “productive” female body that decorate Fontainebleau and its gardens. This reveals a female paradigm of fertility and abundance that contrasts with the masculine aesthetic of blood and sacrifice. Zorach sees blood and milk as two “forms of generativity” that “both do the ideological work for the monarchy (p. 86)” in the art of Fontainebleau. “Ink” examines the print culture that emerged in the wake of Fontainebleau and which actually gave birth to the “style of Fontainebleau” by creating a market for decorative prints based on the designs employed at the château. “Gold,” completes this interpretive tour de force by considering changing uses and understanding of gold in all its manifestations from Cellini’s famous saltcellar to coins, relations with the new world and economic increase generally.

Zorach’s chapter on blood focuses in particular on the frescos and stuccos of Rosso Fiorentino. Here Zorach distances herself from Panofsky’s method of iconology, which she argues seeks to establish the

unified subject of a work with reference to “event based biography” (p. 43). Zorach posits instead that any object may convey “conflicting meanings and ideologies” (p. 45). To ascertain the meaning in the gallery, Zorach suggests that we consider a process or performance of meaning: the king leads his visitors through the Gallerie, explicating the obscure classical references, guiding his guests past “interpretive red herrings”, and thus using the art to perform his own superior understanding of classical themes. The entire Gallerie thus works as a complex projection of royal authority not only as represented in the art but as “re-presented” by the monarch himself in conversations with his guests. Here Zorach’s version of reception theory draws on an imagined oral history of intimate conversations in the Gallerie which Francis may have had with courtiers and visiting ambassadors. Obviously we have no records of these conversations—no relevant ambassadors dispatches, for example, sources she employs in other contexts. Such absence of sources is, of course, the bedeviling problem in the analysis of reception. Zorach’s interpretive procedure is both creative and convincing and enables her to demonstrate the complexity of ways the Gallerie served to enhance the authority of Francis I.

Among the many individual works in the Gallerie, her reinterpretation of Rosso’s “Death of Adonis” is the most provocative and most important to her overall argument. She argues that the fresco’s Christ-like figure is a reference to Attis and his castration. Since “the central figure crosses over iconographic registers, between sacred imagery—the passion and death of Christ—and classical mythology,” an iconographic approach cannot explicate this type of ambiguity (p. 59). Moreover, the dominant scholarship has rejected the idea that the Attis myth could appear in an official royal residence. Zorach explains the Attis fresco within the anthropological and religious context of sacrifice and within a wider theoretical framework of queer theory and cultural materialism that is attentive to erotic forces and the creativity of desire. For Zorach, the castration of Attis includes referentially not only the ancients’ view that “blood is the seed that quickens the earth” (p. 64), but also debates in the 1520s and 1530s about Christ’s blood in the Eucharist, and notions of male fertility. She argues that Renaissance representation of emasculation was not necessarily based on the association of castration with impotence. Emasculation could as well be linked to potency and eroticism. Sacrificial acts do not so much destroy as cause the sacrificial object to transcend spheres and to “circulate symbolically” (p. 69).

Thus, the detachment of a penis might also liberate it to circulate symbolically. She adduces other symbols of genitals throughout the Gallerie (the gestures of the stucco *putti* and the cross-dressed baby Achilles whose gender must be verified). Zorach also connects the castration of Attis to the crucifixion of Christ (p. 67) based on numerous clues in the work and life of Rosso, including his self-referential depictions of Christ with a red beard, and the homoerotic circumstances surrounding Rosso’s suicide. In the next chapter Zorach will return to the significance of the Attis myth through her discussions of Cybele, earth goddess and mother of Attis.

“Milk” examines how “[t]hrough the rhyming of breasts and fruit, the entangling of limbs with vegetation, the proximity of the feminine and the animal” (p. 85), the artists of Fontainebleau connect French identity with the endless productivity of the earth. Nicollò Pericoli’s [Il Tribolo’s] marble statue of “Nature”, Cellini’s bronze salt cellar, “The Nymph of Fontainebleau”, Rosso’s stucco frames for the Gallerie, etchings by Jacques Androuet du Cerceau, and numerous paintings of the School of Fontainebleau all present women with sensuous multiple breasts or who gesture to their breast (“the breast press”) to signify lactation. Zorach explains how this profusion of the breast is a distinctive association of the female, France, and Nature that the royal court promotes to create a national self-representation distinct from the art and artifice associated with Italy.

There follows a fascinating exploration of the evolution of the cult of the goddess Cybele and her associations with France. For example, Zorach shows that the female figure atop the famous salt cellar of Cellini is indeed the female divinity of the earth (a Cybele, in more obscure iconography, a Berecynthia, the very same goddess in the left-hand panel of the Attis fresco in the Gallerie François

Premier (p. 94) done by Rosso. Zorach then untangles the confusion of Cybele, Natura, and Artemis of Ephesus and applies these wide-ranging insights about Cybele to a discussion of other royal media, especially the gifts and ephemeral art created for royal entries of Francis I, Henry II, and Charles IX and his queen Elizabeth. This chapter also includes a more theoretical discussion of the erotic functions of the breast across the sixteenth century that carries forward her examination of the productivity of desire. Zorach ends this chapter suggesting that in the creative imagination of a Palissy or Sambin erotic and magical perceptions of Nature and figures of Nature might take on a bestial or strange monstrosity, as in Palissy's descriptions of gardens and grottos or Hugues Sambin's bizarre architectural figures that straddle the boundaries of art and nature. This material lays a suggestive groundwork for Zorach's treatment of erotic prints and their place in early consumer desire and in the erotic economy of sixteenth-century culture.

The chapter on "Ink" is a fascinating examination of the forms of reproduction and production that Zorach discovers in the ornament prints created in the wake of Fontainebleau. With the death of Francis in 1547, the chateau ceased to be the center for court art. The existing on-site, small-scale print production of etchings based on both the central compositions of the gallery and its elaborate ornamental frames changed. Artists, who had worked with Rosso, moved to Parisian workshops to create designs and ornaments for the private homes of the nobility and for ceremonial entries. Engraving replaced etching as the preferred technology since engraved plates unlike etched ones could be endlessly reused. This shift, a transition from small editions produced under royal patronage to actual "urban business enterprise," (p. 145) created the very means for wide dissemination of the style created for Fontainebleau. Graphic production thus made possible a "school" of Fontainebleau.

More important still, these material and social changes produce an entirely new economy of desire, which is the central subject that Zorach explores here. She draws in important and creative ways on insights from deconstructive theory (Derrida mentions the ornament frames of Fantuzzi in his *The Truth in Painting*), queer theory, and Angus Fletcher's analysis of allegory. All of this bears its own fruit in Zorach's understanding of the significance of the frame and its semiotic creation of boundaries, which both produce order and provide incitement to fantasy and license. With Antonio Fantuzzi and Jacques Androuet Du Cerceau the frame is separated from any composition, a blank space is enframed, or frames are set within frames thus "divesting them of their relationship to a particular narrative" (p. 145). Zorach then considers the aesthetic status and functions of the ornament, a discussion which has interesting resonance in religious debates I have elsewhere analyzed as an aspect of Catholic religious sensibilities about the "performativity" of ritual, of sacred objects, and sacred numbers.[1]

Zorach offers an interesting view of the "homosocial" aspects of the print shop and examines in detail the collaboration between the very successful Parisian printmaker René Boyvin and the Flemish painter and draftsman, Léonard Thiry who worked at Fontainebleau under Rosso. Thiry produced many drawings that are designs for fantasy objects: complex highly decorated items such as an elaborately design-covered wine cask, that work as a "virtuoso performance of draftsmanship" (p. 161). Using inventories after death, Zorach tracks the fate of some of these original hand-drawn designs which suggest avenues of transmission. Other of Thiry's designs became the basis for Boyvin's production of prints. Here Zorach shows us the formation of an economy of the decorative that is a principal force in the origins of "a 'consuming' market in visual culture" (p. 177). The chapter concludes with an intriguing discussion the ways this economy of the decorative could become infused with desire: Boyvin reworked Thiry's designs for the engravings in the *Livre de la conquête de la toison d'or* (1563), producing an elaborate sexual imagery that suggests the play of desire in their personal relations.

In "Gold", Zorach identifies a "cultural topos," she terms "increase." An impressive diversity of topics comes into one conceptual frame here: Bernard Palissy's query about the aliveness of metals, i.e., his

perceptions of the curious creativity of nature; the excessive fashioning of precious metals in gifts for royal entries or as ornaments in churches, derided by Protestants as idols; confusion over sumptuary laws; the growing appeal of math and quantification all appear as part of a culture struggling with perceptions of excess and transgression, and ready as the author suggests, for the imposition of some reliable order. We have moved from the abundant fertility of the French Renaissance, through the permutations, the mannerism in the adaptations of the style of Fontainebleau, to an exhaustion of the classical idiom that Francis I brought from Italy. If there is one conspicuous absence, here it is the problem of the baroque which is really not considered in any detail. The relations of mannerism and the baroque is a thorny subject and perhaps Zorach preferred to sidestep the terminological debates, but some clarification of her position would have been welcome.

In a way that an older history of mentalities could not deliver, Zorach has explored the “imagination” of successive eras presented by her as “a way of thinking about movement back and forth between nature and culture, between the production and consumption of images” (p. 218). Without the interdisciplinary and theoretical range, Zorach’s achievements would simply not have been possible. Her understanding of the “productivity” of matter, the performance of meaning, and the performativity of objects permits her to convey fundamental insights about sixteenth-century sensibilities, which are extremely difficult to analyze and yet are key to our comprehension of the period. The quasi-magical attributes of substances held profound significance in the thought and emotions of persons who lived through the sixteenth century. One of Zorach’s great achievements is to extend this insight beyond the realm of religious debates to explore such a rich web of interconnections. We are still a rather long way from understanding and demonstrating exactly how this web is constructed in conscious and unconscious activity, but Zorach’s work makes this task more intriguing and more necessary than ever.

It is quite inadequate simply to say that commodity fetishism receives a rich historical grounding here. Still one wishes to know more about how “anxieties about *making*” (p. 238) are related to the production or making of meaning, how anxiety about increase and super-abundance is related not just to portions of author’s works but to the development and unfolding of their entire interpretive opus. This suggests another sort of approach that others might take stimulated by what Zorach has accomplished for our understanding of subject/object relations.

The ready made audience for this work among historians is obvious: cultural historians with a passion for theory. The magnificent and copious illustrations make the material readily available to the reader not intimately familiar with the art. This is an extremely valuable work that renders the aesthetic of the French Renaissance compellingly interesting to the general historian who has seriously puzzled over the complexity of the French Renaissance. It will also most certainly dazzle cultural historians with its innovative interpretative methods and theoretical frameworks.

NOTES

[1] Ann W. Ramsey, “Economies of Salvation ca. 1540-ca. 1630: The Nature of the Sacred and the Power to Make Meaning”, in *Liturgy, Politics, and Salvation* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1999).

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