
H-France Review Vol. 9 (August 2009), No. 108

Charlotte Guichard, *Les Amateurs d'Art à Paris au XVIIIe siècle*. Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2008. 400 pp. Bibliography and index. € 29 (pb). ISBN 9782876734920.

Review by Kristel Smentek, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Since the 1980s, histories of European artistic institutions, collecting practices, and art markets have proliferated. In the case of eighteenth-century France, numerous studies have illuminated the mechanisms of the market and the role of collections in knowledge formation and self-representation. But although we are better informed about the consumption of art in the age of Enlightenment, many lacunae remain. Chief among them is the figure of the amateur who, as Charlotte Guichard argues, was more critical to the eighteenth-century French art world than has been assumed. Although the term amateur is a familiar one, Guichard shows that art historians have misunderstood amateurs and underestimated their significance as art historical actors. Marshalling an impressive range of material and combining sociological, historical, and art-historical approaches, Guichard restores historical specificity to the figure of the amateur, and makes a compelling claim for the pivotal role such agents played in the development of new forms of art, sociability, and the market itself.

The amateur was an institutionally-sanctioned artistic arbiter. In part one of her book, Guichard examines the fundamental role of the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in the emergence of this distinct social type. Although founded (in 1648) to defend the liberal status of artists, the academy nevertheless gave a central place to non-practitioners in its administration. Statutes promulgated in 1663 established the position of the honorary amateur, a man of rank—they were always men—given voting rights denied to all but the most senior class of artists within the academy. When the statutes were reformulated in 1747, the institutional definition of the amateur was as well. To his previous responsibilities was added the more urgent charge of defending the institution and its artists from public attack. The changed statutes constituted part of a broader agenda of pedagogical and organizational reform. As Thomas Crow and others have shown, the academy's campaign was largely instituted in response to the emergence of a broader public for art that was of the academy's own making. The monarchy's establishment in 1737 of bi-annual public art exhibitions (known as the Salons), had the undesired effect of prompting pamphlets and brochures critiquing the exhibitions and, by extension, the authorities behind them. In the face of dissident public opinion, the academy sought to reassert royal authority and reclaim its monopoly over artistic discourse.^[1] Guichard's contribution is to show that amateurs were envisioned as crucial to this endeavor.

As she argues, the academy held up amateurs as the ideal public for art, deploying them in response to the illegitimate crowd at the Salon. Central to the institutional definition of the amateur as it was articulated from the 1740s to the 1760s was *goût*, or taste, a concept that was the subject of much theorizing in the eighteenth century. It was taste that differentiated the amateur from the *curieux*, derided as a mere accumulator, and from the connoisseur, defined by his more scholarly *savoir* and discernment. The academy sought to counter the idea, authorized by sensationist theory, that taste resided in sentiment and that anyone could judge a work of art. The amateur was a key weapon in this regard. Through this figure, defined as the sole legitimate judge of taste, the academy sought to arrogate to itself the right to judge. As articulated in texts and lectures, the academy's ideal amateur

subscribed to elite values and was the privileged interlocutor between artist and elites. His judgments were legitimated by his own non-professional artistic practice and by the perfection of his taste through sociable exchange with artists. Such exchanges were couched in a language of friendship that masked the social asymmetry of the relation to the benefit of each party. *Hommes de lettres* were explicitly excluded from this discursive space.

If the academy was fundamental to the construction of the amateur, so too was the collection in which his taste and judgment were materially manifested. Part two examines the collection, and the market that supported it, as physical and discursive spaces in which the identity of the amateur was further constituted and performed. Chief among the practices that established and solidified the authority of the amateur was the publication of his collection through reproductive prints, descriptions in guides to Paris, and catalogues. All of these made the amateur's collection accessible and established his *bona fides* as a man of taste without requiring him to admit any but the most select visitors into his gallery. In addition to printed works, auction sales were another venue in which amateurs, through their purchases, publicly demonstrated their taste and thus their adherence to a select social group. While recent studies have primed us to see the dealer as the pivotal figure in the burgeoning Parisian art market of the eighteenth century, Guichard shows how the amateur was deeply imbricated in its mechanisms, helping to secure the reputations of academic artists and even acting as experts or intermediaries in private sales. She thus nuances Krzysztof Pomian's influential argument that the professional dealer definitively eclipsed the authority of lay experts in eighteenth-century Paris. [2]

Most exciting to me was Guichard's examination of the affective dimensions of collecting and the pleasures of possession. These are issues that are often underexamined in the extant literature on eighteenth-century French collecting practices. Possession entailed looking and touching, acquiring, unpacking, arranging, and rearranging, pleasures that were extended in the act of writing about them. Such pleasures bordered on the erotic. One amateur equated the objects he desired with mistresses and the collection with the seraglio, the eighteenth-century's preferred site for the projection of sexual fantasies (p. 177), and he was not alone in deploying such language. Guichard suggests that the *jouissance* of collecting should be restored to analyses of the eighteenth-century French art market. Economic interest may play a significant role in the rapid expansion of the secondary market for paintings in the second half of the century, but so too may an "aesthetic of possession."

The final section of the book is an extended examination of the new forms of artistic sociability that emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century, and the interactions of amateurs and artists within what Guichard calls the *mondain* culture of the image. From mid-century, more and more amateurs traveled to Rome fueled by a renewed interest in the antique. The amateur's grand tour was testament, Guichard argues, to the new significance of visual culture in the world of the elite. Amateurs devoted their journeys entirely to art, frequently traveled with artists and, once in the eternal city, developed personal relationships with the members of the Académie de France in Rome, the institution to which the academy in Paris sent its most promising students. Amateurs engaged these aspiring artists in an apparently informal and spontaneous exchange of favors and commissions for gifts of drawings or paintings. While much of this section of the book treats well-trodden ground, Guichard provocatively links this form of patronage as *amitié* developed in Rome to the efflorescence of the market for contemporary art in Paris, positing amateurs, and the *mondain* salon culture in which they participated, as its motor force. She thus challenges Colin B. Bailey's recent thesis that the amateur's increasing predilection for modern French painting from c. 1750 is a manifestation of patriotic sentiment. [3] Guichard argues that the amateurs' institutional responsibilities and their affective bonds with artists are more significant factors in explaining both the numbers of contemporary French pictures in Parisian collections and the increasing demand for modern French art. Artists like Joseph Vernet and Hubert Robert, who best understood the codes of this form of elite sociability, and astutely worked within them to promote their work, became some of the century's most fashionable and well-remunerated painters.

If amateurs were protectors of artists, they were also increasingly artistic themselves. Guichard charts in fascinating detail how the group and individual identities of amateurs were invested in their ability to draw and etch. Graphic work by French amateurs has received little scholarly attention; print scholars in particular will find much to reflect on in Guichard's discussion of the social uses of printmaking for this elite. Given lessons by the artists they protected, aided by the *livre de dessiner*, a new genre of book designed specifically for their needs, and legitimated by institutional recognition of their efforts, artistic practice became an essential component of the amateurs' claims to authority in judgments of taste and a vehicle for their subjectivity.

The authority of the amateur was not uncontested, however, and dissatisfaction with this social group began to mount in the 1770s. *Hommes de lettres* increasingly attacked amateurs as symbols of the monarchical system of the arts, and for their tyrannical hold on artists. Amateurs were derided for their bad taste and for their lack of support for the pictures of edifying patriotic themes increasingly demanded by critics. This is familiar territory for art historians; more revelatory is Guichard's argument for the reinvention of the amateur and persistence of some of the values attached to him well into the Revolution. This is just one of the many insights offered by this ambitious and intelligent book. Guichard may press her case too forcefully at times, but having viewed the history of eighteenth-century French art through the lens of the amateur, one will not regard it in the same way again.

NOTES

[1] The authoritative study is Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985).

[2] Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800*, transl. Elizabeth Wiles-Portier (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, and Cambridge, Mass., USA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 139-68.

[3] Colin B. Bailey, *Patriotic Taste: Collecting Modern Art in Pre-Revolutionary Paris* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002).

Kristel Smentek
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
smentek@mit.edu

Copyright © 2009 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172