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Louis Marchesano and Christian Michel, *Printing the Grand Manner: Charles Le Brun and Monumental Prints in the Age of Louis XIV*. Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2010. ix + 110 pp. Illustrations in black and white and colour, notes, bibliography and index (catalogue of the exhibition, *Printing the Grand Manner: Charles Le Brun and Monumental Prints in the age of Louis XIV*, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 18 May-17 October 2010). \$50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-89236-980-5.

Review by Dr Christopher Allen, Sydney Grammar School.

This book deals with the way that Charles Le Brun, the First Painter of Louis XIV, published his painted, and indeed unpainted or unfinished, works and promoted his importance as an artist through the use of reproductive engravings. It was originally published as the catalogue of an exhibition of masterpieces in the collection of the Getty Research Institute in 2010. Specialized as the subject may appear at first sight, it takes us to the heart of French art history in the *grand siècle*, with broader ramifications into the culture and politics of the time. Le Brun was a significant figure, but as the official artist of the Sun King he had to be promoted as a great painter and indeed as eclipsing all his predecessors, modern and ancient (pp. 21-22, 30). Engraving and disseminating his works was the main way this was to be achieved.

The age of Louis XIV was a watershed in one of the most important themes of modern European civilization, namely its relation to Antiquity, the great model of civilization which, for the Renaissance, lay like a mountain range on the horizon beyond the gulf of the Dark Ages. After a couple of centuries of recovery and emulation, always with the tantalizing possibility of surpassing these paradigms of excellence in certain fields (printing, in fact, was one of several new discoveries duly celebrated), the French were the first to claim that they had rendered the ancients obsolete and to sneer at the classical authors in what became known as the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. This French chauvinism would not only inspire the later Romantic revival of interest in alternative cultural traditions—and indeed the emergence of the very idea of culture—but also provoke a new and radical understanding of Antiquity itself from the mid-eighteenth century.

French pride in their achievements was not entirely gratuitous. There had been an enormous and systematic effort of cultural reconstruction after the dereliction of the religious wars. The Académie française began, in the 1630s, as a club of men of letters seeking to reform the use of the language and the conventions of literature. It was encouraged by Cardinal Richelieu who shared these concerns and who also preferred a more sober and classical style in painting. The earliest art theoretical writers, Fréart de Chambray and Abraham Bosse, similarly insisted on the rules and correct procedures of art; the tone of their writing was not only earnest, but at times even hectoring.

The *Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture* was founded in 1648, although it was originally a professional association whose object was to free its members from the monopoly of the Guild of Painters, rather than to enforce any particular theory of art. This initial openness was reflected in the varied styles of its founder members, although as its public discussions began in the sixties, disagreements and then open hostility broke out between the proponents of *dessin* and *coloris* as the foundations of good painting. The line versus colour debate, as it is also known, with its respective heroes Raphael and Titian—later updated to

Poussin and Rubens--would persist until the nineteenth century, with new figureheads in Ingres and Delacroix.

A certain rationalism, whose reverse was rule-bound dogmatism, was pervasive in *dix-septième* thinking, but it was one man, Colbert, who marshaled and mobilized these tendencies in the most determined and centralized programme of cultural management the world had ever seen. It was Colbert who gave the Académie française a large clock and ensured that their meetings started on time and made progress on their endlessly deferred dictionary project. And it was Colbert who ensured that the Academy of painters became a uniquely powerful instrument both for training competent artists and the glorification of the reign of his master, Louis XIV. Like the Moderns in the *Querelle*, Colbert was a cultural nationalist: it was almost obligatory to believe that the literature and art of his time surpassed those of antiquity, since it was axiomatic that great ages, and great princes, produced great cultural monuments.

Charles Le Brun, earlier employed by the unfortunate Fouquet, was quickly identified by Colbert as the man to whom he could entrust the execution of his arts policy: Le Brun was talented, ambitious and indefatigable, perfectly suited to the role of official painter and chief artistic impresario of the reign. Not only was he *Premier peintre du roi* from the 1660s until his death in 1690, but Colbert made him the Director of the *Manufacture des Gobelins*, the centralized workshops established to produce the furniture and other ornaments of the royal residences, and ensured his ascendancy at the Academy. Le Brun held the position of Chancellor, nominally subordinate to that of Director, but contrived to keep the directorship vacant or powerless until finally assuming that role too, as a precautionary measure when his authority was fatally compromised by Colbert's death in 1683.

The most celebrated patron and painter in the history of art were respectively Alexander and Apelles, about whom several famous stories were told and retold in Renaissance art writing, variants being attributed to contemporaries (when Caravaggio sought refuge with the knights in Malta he was briefly celebrated as their own Apelles). It was thus almost inevitable that Le Brun should be called the Apelles of the reign, and Louis XIV was initially very happy to be characterized as a young Alexander. After the Peace of Nijmegen in 1678, however, when it came to decorating the newly-enclosed Galerie des Glaces, it was decided to celebrate the main achievements and conquests of the reign more overtly and to represent the King *in propria persona*.

The first and most famous of the Alexander paintings for Louis is the *Queens of Persia* (1661). It displays the magnanimity of the conqueror when the mother of the defeated Persian king Darius mistakenly bows down before his friend Hephaestion. This was a rare subject in art, though there is a version by Veronese (1565-67) in the National Gallery in London. Less obviously, the picture is a rather misconceived homage to Poussin and his idea of expression. Emulation of earlier masters was an essential way of establishing one's own standing as their successor, equal or even superior. Thus, in 1660-61, Le Brun had planned a version of the *Battle of the Milvian Bridge* with a view to surpassing both the Raphael-Giulio Romano and Rubens versions of this famous subject (Rubens in turn had been inspired by Leonardo's unfinished *Battle of Anghiari*), although he was distracted from completing it by other business. After the success of the *Queens of Persia*, Le Brun proceeded to paint a series of colossal pictures of the Battles of Alexander, this time with the aim of showing that he could also outdo the baroque master Pietro da Cortona.

It was all very well to claim the status of a new Apelles, however, or to celebrate a new Alexander, but for these claims to be recognized, it was necessary for the works to be seen by an international public, beyond those who could look at the paintings *in situ*. This was especially the case as France was comparatively a long way from the capital of modern art in Rome and had to struggle initially to assert its right to be taken seriously by the Italians (p.

42). No one doubted that France was a great power, but the most important French artists, Poussin and Claude, had chosen to live and work in Rome.

The medium that helped French art find a wider public was the same that had earlier allowed French painters, in the first decades of the century, to form some idea of the great works of Raphael and the antique. Engraving had been praised for this very reason by early French art writers, but they were speaking of Italians like Marcantonio Raimondi, who worked for Raphael. More recent models included Rubens, who had taken even greater care with the publication of his works, and still closer to home Simon Vouet, who had brought the Roman style back to Paris in 1627 and dominated the art scene until his death in 1649. There was thus nothing unfamiliar about the idea of reproductive engraving in the second half of the seventeenth century. What was novel, as the authors of the catalogue show, was the systematic way that it was used to achieve goals largely shared by Colbert and Le Brun.

It was politically important, as already mentioned, to show Le Brun's talent off in the best possible light for the glory it reflected onto his royal patron, so the task of engraving his compositions was entrusted to the best practitioners, retained and handsomely rewarded for their services. The whole process was meticulously supervised by Le Brun himself, who allotted different jobs to his two best engravers, Gérard Edelinck and Gérard Audran, according to their particular talents and sensibilities. He gave large figure compositions to Edelinck, who was a master of the burin with an extraordinary gift for conveying the different textures and tactile qualities of materials, while Audran, who used a combination of engraving and the quicker, more informal medium of etching, was entrusted with large history paintings that called for energy and animation (pp. 19-20).

Cheap copies were prohibited by a special *privilège* granted very early to Le Brun himself (pp. 39-40). The *privilège* system was the precursor to copyright, but it was usually issued to a publisher for a certain number of years, and could not be renewed without a substantial change to the contents of a book, which is one reason that reissues of books at the time often contained additional texts. In the field of prints, a *privilège* might be granted to the publisher of an engraving. On the other hand, the owner of a picture would usually have the right to reproduce it. Le Brun's *privilège* in effect reserved all these rights to the artist himself in a way that was unprecedented and anticipated the British copyright laws of the following century, associated with Hogarth.

The main focus of the book is on the enormous reproductions, made on multiple plates, of the still more immense paintings of the Battles of Alexander, but engraving was also important as a way of publishing works that for one reason or another were never able to be realized as finished paintings. One such example was the *Battle of the Milvian Bridge*, already referred to, originally a request from Cardinal Mazarin himself, but executed by Le Brun only as an exceptionally energetic oil sketch. A few years later, when Le Brun was busy with the Battles of Alexander, Audran turned this sketch into a spectacular engraving (1666).

Still more important for our understanding of Le Brun is the engraving of his design for the *Fall of the Rebel Angels*, a composition he had originally intended for the ceiling of the Chapel at Versailles, but then the old building was demolished and the present one not finished until after Le Brun's death. At the same time, Colbert's death in 1683 left Le Brun in a vulnerable position; his successor Louvois disliked Le Brun and supported his rival Pierre Mignard. Le Brun tactically shored up his position within the bastion of the Academy and was shielded by the personal support of Louis, but Louvois robbed him of the chance for any further large commissions.

The engraving was cleverly packaged to appeal to Louvois—St Michael was his patron saint, and the defeat of the rebel angels could be taken as an allegory of his initiative in persecuting the Protestants after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685—but all to no avail (pp. 2-3, 45). What the print does achieve, however, is to reveal the baroque side to Le

Brun, which is often underestimated. It is, like the *Battle of the Milvian Bridge*, an attempt to rival Rubens, in this case specifically in a subject that the contemporary critic Roger de Piles had provocatively extolled as inimitable.

This book is a most welcome addition to our understanding of Le Brun, an artist who is, incredibly given his historical importance, still awaiting a modern monographic exhibition, or a proper general study. There are some outstanding books on aspects of his oeuvre, but no synthesis. It is almost paradoxical that he should be so elusive; he is not a deep artist like Poussin, and yet he is certainly complex. One problem is that he is too often thought of as a mere sequel to Poussin, just as the academic movement in general is misunderstood as an ossification of Poussin's doctrine. Even in this book, my only real objection is to the suggestion (p. 24) that the *Queens of Persia*, as already mentioned above, is an embodiment of Poussin's theory of expression; on the contrary, Poussin's idea of expression is fundamentally pre-cartesian, while Le Brun's is post-cartesian and mechanistic.[1]

That said, both Louis Marchesano's introduction to the subject, including many of the general topics outlined above, and Christian Michel's discussion of printmaking and the diffusion of published images in the *dix-septième siècle* are erudite, engaging and readable.[2] There is some overlap and repetition between the two essays, but the great virtue of this book is to make these extraordinarily important prints accessible to contemporary readers, whether interested primarily in the history of the period in general or more specifically in art history. The quality of the reproductions is such that we can form a good idea of the remarkable impression the original prints must have made when they were first published, including close-ups that allow us to understand more of the strangely abstract language of lines and hatching that make up the printed image. The whole project was indeed almost too successful. In a perverse, but rather typically French way, it became a commonplace in the following century to claim that Audran's reproductions in particular were superior to Le Brun's originals.

NOTES

[1] Christopher Allen, "Painting the Passions", in Stephen Gaukroger ed., *The Soft Underbelly of Reason* (London: Routledge, 1998), and more generally Christopher Allen, *French Painting in the Golden Age* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003). It is even more misleading to suggest that the 1647 painting of the *Massacre of the Innocents* "shows Le Brun at his most Poussinesque" (p. 8). Le Brun, especially in his youth, had a love of violence never shared by Poussin.

[2] One small mistake in translation: *plus d'un noble dessein* does not mean "more than a noble design" (p. 30), but "more than one", i.e., many. The highly ambiguous word *dessein* is correctly understood in this context as meaning "subject."

Christopher Allen
Sydney Grammar School
cda@sydgram.nsw.edu.au

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