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Ronit Milano, *The Portrait Bust and French Cultural Politics in the Eighteenth Century*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015. xiii + 228 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. €125,00 / \$174.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-90-04-27624-6; (eb) 978-90-04-27625-3.

Review by Heather Belnap Jensen, Brigham Young University.

“The term ‘portrait bust’ rarely awakens much enthusiasm among contemporary art connoisseurs, most of whom will likely circumvent major museum galleries devoted to this genre of sculpture” (p. 1). Having dispensed with this matter of business in her opening line, author Ronit Milano delves into the task of convincing her readers that such a response is unwarranted. In certain historical periods, the author argues, the art form was tremendously popular, had myriad uses in the public and private sectors, held widespread appeal for the middle and upper classes, and proved economically and critically profitable for sculptors. The last few decades leading up to the Revolution constituted one such era. Hence, the portrait bust performed important work in that it served as “an agent of cultural change” (p. 5), consolidating and promoting political and sociocultural ideas of consequence for the French privileged classes.

Treating the portrait bust as its own artistic genre, with particular formulae, traditions, and material practices, Milano finds that this seemingly limited art form held a range of expressive possibilities, and that these expressions engaged in important ways with Enlightenment concepts such as individualism, virtue, and happiness. Other developments, such as the rise of the bourgeoisie and the increasing democratization of the political and public spheres, both enabled and were facilitated by these portrait busts. She writes: “By contributing to the formation of a modern identity and new collective image of French society, and by shaping and distributing various Enlightenment ideals, the portrait bust inevitably played a part in the series of cultural, political, and social processes that eventually led to the Revolution” (p. 7) In sum, the portrait bust constituted an important site in the negotiation of identity and subjectivity in an auspicious age.

The introduction to Milano’s book serves as a solid synopsis, laying out the purpose of conducting this study, the key questions it queries, and its place in the historiography of eighteenth-century art. Problematizing the conventional readings of these busts as classicized renditions of sitters, the author promotes a more capacious interpretive mode that acknowledges the significance of the classical tradition while accommodating the many modernizing elements that contributed to the complexity of cultural production in this era. Extending Michael Fried’s conceit of absorption and theatricality in painting and changes to the beholder’s share in this historical period into the analysis of sculptural portraits, the author maintains that the latter genre was remarkable in its ability to hold the two poles in a productive kind of tension so as to mark and facilitate the processes of modern selfhood.[1]

Each of the book’s five chapters focuses on a different category of portrait bust. Chapter one, “‘He is a Philosopher’: Individual versus Collective Identity,” examines portraits of famous philosophers and how it was requisite that these busts evince not only the sitter’s singularity, but also the ways in which they participated in the collective enterprise of the Enlightenment. Milano argues that these busts yielded a peculiar form of hybridity of the individual and the generic. This chapter explores the dialectics of

naturalism and classicism that underpin their conception and execution, along with the evolving relationship between the object and the audience that affected their reception. In chapter two, "Decent Exposure: Bosoms, Smiles, and Maternal Delight in Female Portraits," the author explores the new artistic formula for representing femininity in the sculpted representations of French women. Contending that the mapping out and conveying of female pleasure, envisioned as a quixotic blend of the maternal and the erotic, was central to this enterprise, Milano effectively demonstrates how the central motifs of the smile and the semi-nude breast worked to accomplish this construction. The following chapter, "Between Innocence and Disillusion: Representations of Children and Childhood," gives careful consideration to portrait busts of children as interpreted within eighteenth-century French culture's intense interest in the state of childhood and its relation to nature, and how this fascination with capturing childhood encouraged new directions in the sculpture medium itself.

Chapter four, "Transitional Identities: Family Structure, the Social Order, and Alternative Masculinities at the Dawn of Modernity," provides the final angle of the family triangle of mother-child-father that serves as the keystone of this study. Here, sculpted portraits of bourgeois men, the largest group of original busts commissioned during this era, are analyzed within the complex matrices of emerging definitions of modern masculinity. Milano correctly points out the large cultural shifts that affected definitions of masculinity and its authority and meanings, and offers nuanced readings of representative busts of bourgeois men grappling with these changes. The final chapter, "The Face of the Monarchy: Court Propaganda and the Portrait Bust," uses the lens of new constructions of identity and the complicated relations between representation in the private and public spheres in the waning years of the ancien régime to scrutinize bust portraits of the royal court, and in particular the last three kings of pre-Revolutionary France. This chapter feels out of place at the end of the book and would have been more effectively placed at the beginning, as its purview spans the mid-seventeenth through the end of the eighteenth century and as it focuses on the major trendsetters in art and culture of the ancien régime. Remarks made in the book's conclusion, which touch upon the post-Revolutionary world of sculpture, seem more relevant to the discussion of representing the bourgeois man than to imaging the king.

The author maintains that sculpted portrait bust should be viewed as a somewhat exceptional art form in this period. As it operated on the threshold between private and public spheres, she argues that it was uniquely placed to present cultural and political meanings. Limited in terms of body language and inclusion of extraneous accessory objects, it was requisite that iconographic associations inhere within the portrait bust proper. Prone to be reproduced and resituated in various contexts, it was necessary to have its meanings self-contained. Indeed, much of Milano's analysis hinges on the premise that the meanings of these sculptural busts were not necessarily connected to their physical surroundings, but rather were established by conceptual or ideological frameworks in mid to late-eighteenth century France. While this is a largely advantageous and even necessary approach, given the difficulty of reconstructing specific physical contexts, it has its drawbacks. These portrait busts would certainly accrue different meanings when in the Salon, country estate, bourgeois apartment, and royal palace, as well as in their position in relation to other objects, and this deserves some acknowledgement.

While the inclusion of examples from the better-known genre of painted portraiture is useful for enabling the author to engage with the fertile terrain of this scholarship, I am not entirely convinced that it supports her argument for the stylistic and functional differences between the painted and sculpted genres, especially given that most of the painted portraits discussed were not bust-length. I kept wondering whether this claim to difference really held: just how uniquely positioned was the sculptured portrait bust within the late eighteenth-century French art world? For example, could not the same case be made for *painted* bust portraits of the elite, which were also deprived of bodily expressivity and other iconographic markers, and also copied and sited in myriad ways? Also, one wonders if perhaps more attention to criticism of these works, as generated by the Salons and in

journals and personal correspondence, might illuminate how various viewing audiences interpreted these sculptural busts and therefore contribute to determining the kind of cultural work they performed.

These issues aside, this is a compelling book. Solidly researched and cogently argued, it provides an important corrective to the lacuna of scholarship on sculpted portrait busts in the modern era and stands as an excellent complement to recent publications on late eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century portraiture.^[2] One would be remiss, however, to characterize this study as merely a rehabilitation project of the overlooked genre of the sculptural portrait. Rather, Milano's book makes the bold and persuasive argument that these objects participated in the formation of French cultural values and practices, c. 1750-1790, and that the genre "provides us with a collective portrait" of this era (p. 21). Moreover, it engages with and extends existing cultural studies of pre-Revolutionary France that give due diligence to the important work done by material objects. The author's ability to distill complicated theoretical processes and complex cultural dynamics in a clear and straightforward manner is commendable, and means that this book will be accessible to the student and professor alike. In the end, this study makes a case for the need to resist the urge to skip over the museum galleries devoted to sculpted portraits and to take seriously this oft overlooked artistic genre.

NOTES

[1] Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

[2] Sébastien Allard et. al., *Portraits publics, portraits privées, 1770-1830* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 2006), published in English as *Citizens and Kings: Portraits in the Age of Revolution, 1760-1830* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2007). See also Tony Halliday, *Facing the Public: Portraiture in the Aftermath of the French Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Margaret A. Oppenheimer, *The French Portrait: Revolution to Restoration*, exh. cat. (Northampton, Mass.: Smith College of Art, 2005); and most recently, Amy Freund, *Portraiture and Politics in Revolutionary France* (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2014) and Hannah Williams, *The Académie Royale: A History in Portraits* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015).

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