
H-France Review Vol. 6 (September 2006), No. 111

Elizabeth Hyde, *Cultivated Power: Flowers, Culture, and Politics in the Reign of Louis XIV*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. xxiii + 330 pp. Figures, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-81223826-5.

Review by Jeffrey S. Ravel, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

H-France readers, particularly those who study the Old Regime, will not be surprised to learn from this thoroughly researched, beautifully illustrated new book that Louis XIV exploited “flower power” to burnish his image within the kingdom and beyond. Inter-disciplinary work by Louis Marin, Jean-Marie Apostolidès, Peter Burke, Chandra Mukerji, Abby Zanger, and many others has taught us that the Sun King and his ministers fashioned the royal image from a variety of materials, in multiple media formats. [1] As Elizabeth Hyde makes clear, Louis did not invent the political uses of flowers, just as he was not the first to turn drama or architecture or numismatics to his own ends. Louis seized upon floricultural practices developed before his reign, in France and elsewhere, and “supersized” them to fit the grandiose scale of Versailles and his ambitions. Hyde effectively demonstrates how the Sun King’s awareness of the exotic culture of flower collecting in seventeenth-century Europe led him to create an elaborate supply system throughout the kingdom whose purpose was to provide the royal residences in the Parisian basin with blooming flowers throughout the year.

His courtiers also realized the cultural capital inherent in blossoms; when Jean Donneau de Visé, the editor of the monthly periodical *Mercure Galant*, wished to be named an official court historian in 1688, he created a beautifully illustrated manuscript entitled *Histoire de Louis le Grand, contenüe dans les rapports qui se trouvent entre ses actions, & les qualités, & vertus des fleurs, et des plantes*. In this text, whose unique copy is conserved in the manuscripts department of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the flowers themselves, personified, compete with each other to identify their elegant qualities in the deeds and comportment of the monarch. While Donneau de Visé’s work is charming, Hyde points out that it is somewhat surprising from our contemporary perspective, and also from the vantage point of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In both the earlier periods and our own, flowers have been seen as fleeting and ephemeral, as well as highly feminized. Given these associations, why did Donneau de Visé think it appropriate to flatter a king by comparing his attributes to those of the flowers? Hyde’s answer to this question is actually more intriguing than her account of Louis XIV’s predictable use of the symbolism of the French floricultural tradition. It involves a fascinating chapter in the history of gender construction in the early modern period, and an important contribution to the study of commerce and consumption in Old Regime France. Interestingly, the author’s ability to pinpoint the fertile conjunction of royal patronage and floral cultivation in the second half of the seventeenth century says more important things about these long-term trends than about the reign of *Louis le Grand* itself.

In addition to the flowers, the most important protagonists in Hyde’s story are the *curieux fleuristes*, men in the seventeenth century who linked the collection and cultivation of luxurious, fragrant blossoms to the world of the *honnête homme* and the salon. These figures had to combat longstanding, gendered perceptions of flowers that drew on medieval medical practices and classical mythology as reinterpreted by Renaissance humanists. These traditions associated flowers with female fecundity, abundance, and beauty, but also with danger, sin, and sexuality, as the many textual and visual puns on flowers and female genitalia suggest. Hyde points out that the cultural ambivalence towards floral symbolism was evident in Renaissance treatments of Flora, the ancient goddess of flowers: writers and artists argued over whether she was the chaste wife of Zephyr, pagan god of the winds, or a promiscuous Roman

courtesan. Meanwhile, in the early modern French marketplace, the selling of cut flowers for medicinal, dietary, and decorative purposes also came to be gendered feminine, a fact acknowledged when the crown created the exclusively female flower-sellers guild in 1677.

But by the seventeenth century, the importation of new plant species to Western Europe meant that flowers also symbolized geo-political ambition and new scientific knowledge; flower collecting became a subset of the general interest in natural history displayed by amateurs who created *cabinets de curiosités* or *wunderkammern* to house their specimen collections. In France, collectors of rare bulbs and new hybrids saw flowers not as markers of raw nature and female sexuality, but as demonstrations of their own fine taste and devotion to the reasoned exploration of nature. Although more rigorous Cartesian rationalists critiqued the new “curiosity” for flowers, the *curieux fleuristes* had managed to establish flower collecting as a fashionable and entertaining pastime for elites by the second half of the seventeenth century. Well before Louis XIV took note of the fad, the ranks of these fashionable floral collectors included clergymen, royal doctors and gardeners, university faculty members, the ministers Sully and Richelieu, and princes of the blood such as the Grand Condé and Gaston, Duc d’Orléans.

Hyde observes that not all flowers were equal in the eyes of the *curieux*, who displayed a particular passion for tulips, carnations, anemones, ranunculi, hyacinths, and auriculas. The tulip, whose provenance was either Turkey or the Caribbean, sparked an initial floral mania in France and especially the Netherlands in the first half of the seventeenth century, but the other varietals mentioned above also had their partisans in that century and the next. Numerous books devoted to the history, etymology, purchase, care, and proper display of these “fine flowers” rolled off the presses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, often richly illustrated. Artists were hired to make visual records of the most pleasing outdoor flower beds and interior floral arrangements, and to decorate furniture, walls, and porcelain with two-dimensional floral designs. Seeds and plants were offered for sale in Paris at Les Halles, and also along various quays throughout the city, although Hyde notes that the French distribution system never reached the volume or level of complexity obtained by the Dutch. By the time André Le Nôtre set about creating the gardens at Vaux-le-Vicomte (and at Versailles and other royal residences), the need to include a floral design component in his schemes was self-evident. The royal blossoms were displayed to greatest effect inside the king’s residences and in smaller gardens on his estates, such as the Trianon (known popularly among late seventeenth-century courtiers as the *palais du Flore*) or at Marly. The delicacy of the individual blooms and their unique fragrances were lost in the larger setting of the formal gardens attached to the main château at Versailles, but the smaller settings functioned as floricultural *cabinets* where the king could impress his privileged guests with the virtuosity of his floral cultivation. To create these effects year-round, the king’s gardeners established an elaborate supply system that stretched from Picardy to Savoy; this network featured a royal nursery in Toulon that was shipping thousands of mature bulbs north to Versailles and other royal residences by the 1690s.

In an all-too-short epilogue, Hyde observes that the royal obsession with floriculture faded after the Sun King’s demise in 1715. His successor, while an amateur botanist who experimented with hybrids in the privacy of the royal apartments, allowed the crown’s floral farms to lapse into neglect. By the 1740s, his gardeners were ordering hyacinths on an annual basis from Dutch catalogue merchants. And by the early nineteenth century, floral mania had disappeared entirely from displays of masculine taste and distinction, once again relegated to the realm of the feminine as domesticated women were encouraged to tend small floral plots in order to decorate their homes with freshly cut flowers. While the author’s focus is clearly on the seventeenth century, her story prompts a series of questions about its eighteenth-century sequel. Did French floriculture pass from the realm of the *curieux fleuristes* to more popular sectors of the populace? What role did flowers play in the expanding consumer culture of the eighteenth century, or in the “history of everyday things?”^[2] Did the revolutionaries incorporate floral symbolism into the public rituals of the 1790s, and if so, how did their use of it differ from Bourbon practice?

Although Elizabeth Hyde's readers will not find the answers to these questions in *Cultivated Power*, they will undoubtedly be grateful for her invitation to stop and smell the Old Regime roses...and tulips, carnations, hyacinths, and anemones.

NOTES

[1] Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King*, trans. Martha Houle (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Jean-Marie Apostolidès, *Le Roi-machine: Spectacle et politique au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris: Les Éditions de minuit, 1981); Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992); Chandra Mukerji, *Territorial Ambitions and the Gardens of Versailles* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Abby Zanger, *Scenes From the Marriage of Louis XIV: Nuptial Fictions and the Making of Absolutist Power* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[2] Daniel Roche, *A History of Everyday Things: The Birth of Consumption in France, 1600-1800*, trans. Brian Pierce (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), is silent on the question of Old Regime floriculture.

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ISSN 1553-9172