
H-France Review Vol. 12 (February 2012), No. 27

Alison McQueen, *Empress Eugénie and the Arts: Politics and Visual Culture in the Nineteenth Century*. Surry, England and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2011. xx + 348 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$124.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4094-0585-6.

Review by Caterina Y. Pierre, CUNY-Kingsborough Community College.

If scholars of French nineteenth-century art know anything about Eugénie, last empress of the French (1826-1920), it is that she took the opportunity to bestow the Legion of Honor upon the painter Rosa Bonheur in 1865. In her unannounced visit, she famously said to Bonheur, “à mes yeux le genie n’a pas de sexe,” and thus placed, for the first time, a female creator within the ranks previously only held by male artists. Apart from this, however, nothing significant has been presented with regard to Eugénie’s role as a supporter of the arts, as a commissioner of buildings public and private, or even as a collector and curator of significant collections of art. Alison McQueen’s recently published book, *Empress Eugénie and the Arts: Politics and Visual Culture in the Nineteenth Century*, strives to present Eugénie within all of these roles, as well as presenting her as a pious woman of charity and as a devoted wife and mother.

McQueen undertakes an exploration of Eugénie’s complicated public and private persona in an introduction, five chapters and a short epilogue. The chapters cover the myriad ways in which Eugénie made use of art to promote causes that were personally significant to her, as well as to advance specific political agendas that were important during the Second Empire. These causes included her commitment to education for all children, especially to women’s education in France; to supporting young artists of the academy and the avant-garde; to promoting French power through diplomacy; and to the memory of her husband of twenty years, Napoléon III and their son the prince imperial, Eugène Louis Jean Joseph Napoléon. The empress also carefully crafted her public image through numerous commissioned and unprompted portraits by various artists both famous and unknown to us today. These chapters work to sculpt McQueen’s own portrait of Eugénie and challenge what has been previously written on the empress.

The short introduction (six pages, with notes) does not specifically mention previous publications that McQueen hopes to challenge with her research, but she does state what she is challenging: the multitude of accounts that are or were “critical of Eugénie’s actions or jealous of her beauty and social position,” which have led us to believe that she was nothing more than “a shallow socialite, a fanatical Catholic, and a political opportunist” (p.1). To accomplish this, McQueen bases much of her account of Eugénie’s involvement with the arts on primary materials that she has unearthed from various archival sites including those at Fribourg, London, Madrid, Munich, Paris and the Vatican.

In her first chapter, “Shaping a Nation-State: The Politics of Piety, Charity and Education,” McQueen focuses her study on the creation of the Fondation Eugène Napoléon, which was a boarding school for French girls of little financial means. Eugénie used her 600,000-franc credit for engagement jewelry towards the creation of the building for the school, designed by Jakob-Ignaz Hittorff. The building was often disparagingly called the “House of the Necklace,” both because it was paid for with money that was supposed to have been used for jewelry and because the building’s plan was designed in the shape of a necklace. McQueen shows that Eugénie was involved in all aspects of the building, including everything from the site selection, the choice of artists for the interior decoration, even the choice of

sinks for the dormitories and the color of the students' uniforms. While McQueen does discuss Eugénie's appreciation for Marie-Antoinette in various places later in the book, one wonders why the obvious connection to the "Diamond Necklace Affair," in which Marie-Antoinette was embroiled in the 1780s, was not specifically mentioned here as one possible reason why Eugénie avoided buying jewelry as her first act as empress. However, the chapter does deeply explore Eugénie's commitment to the project and the reader learns much about, among other artworks for the building, the symbolism of the original and final versions of the hemicycle for the building's chapel by Félix Barrias. The lengthy chapter covers Eugénie's involvement in other charitable projects, including (but not limited to) her commission for the Chapel of Saint Theodosie at Amiens Cathedral; her work with social services such as maternal societies, hospitals and nurseries; her orphanage system for boys; her development of services for veterans and for prison reform; and her visits to cholera victims. The chapter ends with images of Eugénie depicted in art as a charitable figure by various painters and sculptors, including Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux.

In the next chapter, "Imperial Identities: The "Ornament of the Throne," McQueen surveys the large corpus of portraits of Eugénie that she either inspired or personally commissioned, spanning from an early work by Édouard Odier from 1849 (that is, before she was empress) to the end of the Second Empire. Key to this discussion are the portraits of Eugénie made by Franz Xaver Winterhalter, including his *Empress Eugénie in Eighteenth-Century Costume* (1854, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and his *Empress Eugénie in Ermine* (1864, Château de Compiègne, Paris). Most interesting here is the way in which McQueen discusses how Eugénie's image evolved over time, from a young, somewhat restrained woman who accepts but does not abuse her political power, as seen in Winterhalter's *The Empress Eugénie Surrounded by her Ladies-in-Waiting* (1855, Château de Compiègne, Paris); to the mother of the heir to the throne, exhibited in Winterhalter's *Empress Eugénie holding Louis Napoléon, the Prince Imperial on her knees* (1857, Private Collection); to a truly regal figure who remains delicate but who, by then, possessed real confidence and power, as especially depicted in Winterhalter's *Empress Eugénie Seated in an Orate Chair* (1862, Fundación Casa de Alba, Madrid).

McQueen convincingly argues that Eugénie fared best when her Spanish heritage was played down in portraits of her. Sculptural portraits of the empress are also discussed here, including those by Adèle d'Affry (known as Marcello), Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, Charles Cordier, Marie-Louise Lefèvre Deumier, and Alfred-Émilien, comte de Nieuwerkerke. Finally, photographic images of Eugénie, either with her husband and son, or alone, dressed in exotic costumes of the type she was said to have worn at costume balls, complete the chapter. McQueen argues that the photos of Eugénie in costume allowed for a prolongation of the *bals masques* and an escape into an imaginary realm for the empress. Similarly posed and exotic images of her husband's mistress, the Countess of Castiglione, Virginia Oldoini, are briefly alluded to here and possibly the only failing of this chapter is that the reader is left wanting a more developed discussion of how Eugénie's posed and private photographic images may have been designed as a challenge to the images produced by her husband's mistress, especially since some of the images of Eugénie may have been taken by Pierre-Louis Pierson, who was also Castiglione's photographer and collaborator.

Eugénie's collecting practices are the subject of chapter three, and McQueen covers her earliest purchases beginning at the Salon of 1853 through those from the Universal Exposition of 1867, after which time her active collecting of art from expositions began to decline. Her tastes were eclectic, and she purchased examples of all subject matters and greatly supported women artists. McQueen goes to great lengths to list everything that Eugénie bought over the fifteen-year span on which she focuses, providing the artist, title, date and even the price paid for each work, if that information was available. Where possible, McQueen informs the reader on whether the artwork was a purchase made with state funds or from Eugénie's own privy purse. Unfortunately, at times the reader can become overwhelmed by minutiae, and some of the paragraphs have the tendency to read like shopping lists; an appendix may have alleviated this issue. Having said this, it is revealing to learn from this chapter that Eugénie had a

collection of over 300 artworks and that she supported avant-garde artists such as Camille Corot, Gustave Courbet and other creators whose “works were not being purchased for France’s museums” (p. 151). She made a purchase from the Salon des Refusés of 1863 of a series of paintings of the four seasons by Paul Gariot, thus significantly supporting an artist that the academic Salon jury chose to reject, and even purchased a seductive nude by Paul Baudry, *The Pearl and the Wave* (1862, Prado Museum, Madrid) that exudes just as much sexual power as Cabanel’s *Birth of Venus*, purchased from the same Salon by her husband.

The most valuable contribution this chapter makes to art history, however, is the reconstruction of the empress’s apartment at the Tuileries. Destroyed during the *journées sanglantes* of May 1871, McQueen reconstructs the three principle spaces using original design and project drawings, engravings of the ceiling paintings, Eugène Rouyer’s *Les appartements privés de S.M. l’Impératrice au palais des Tuileries* (published in 1867), and the existing photographs of Edouard Dubufe’s paintings made for the *salon bleu*, where Eugénie had meetings with institutional and diplomatic figures. The *salon bleu* contained six portraits of notable contemporary women, shown as allegorical figures of the countries from which they hailed. Dubufe’s allegorical portraits were of women selected by Eugénie herself and who were “significant as either trusted supporters or strategic representatives whose portraits created an aura of political allegiance” (p. 204). How impressive it must have been to a person seeking assistance or support from Eugénie to be received in the *salon bleu*, surrounded by images of powerful women from around the globe, and to be faced with the most powerful of them all, Eugénie herself, in the flesh.

Chapter four, entitled “International Diplomacy and Transnationalism,” deals with projects that Eugénie commissioned and/or supported and which she had hoped would “promote France’s role as a leading global power” (p. 227). These projects included the creation of the Musée Chinois at the Château at Fontainebleau; the building of the Chapelle Impériale at Biarritz; the reconstruction project for the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem; and the commemoration of the opening of the Suez Canal. The exploration of the Musée Chinois is a compelling one. For the first time in the book, McQueen must deal with the delicate issue of spolia, art taken from a country during a military campaign or expedition. The Chinese works taken from the Yuanming Yaun represent issues of imperialism and colonialism and their representation in a French château negated their original meaning. McQueen correctly presents the Musée Chinois as a space that worked to establish France’s political dominance over Asia, rather than a true museum promoting the study of and respect for the objects on view. The Chapelle Impériale at Biarritz, on the border between France and Spain, was created as a Hispanic-inspired space, and references both Eugénie’s Spanish heritage and to commemorate the successful military campaigns in Mexico in 1864. The artistic program of the chapel becomes more complicated because by the time the altar of this chapel was consecrated in 1866, the colonization of Mexico had begun to fail, and had completely collapsed with the execution of Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian in 1867. McQueen fully discusses the multilayered complications of the artistic program of the chapel in Biarritz.

McQueen also discusses one of Eugénie’s failed projects in this chapter: the campaign to reconstruct the dome of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. The empress appears to have underestimated the problems she would have in trying to secure financial and political support for the reconstruction, and her strong appeal to the protestant Queen Victoria, which McQueen recounts in detail, seems quite naïve on Eugénie’s part. The reader almost gets the sense, in reading the first three chapters, that Eugénie was infallible; here, she is shown as capable of completely misjudging a situation, and—whether this was McQueen’s intention is unclear—it actually works to humanize her.

The humanization of Eugénie continues in the final chapter of the book, entitled “Family, Memory and Dynastic Nostalgia.” After the fall of the Second Empire in 1870, Eugénie fled to England, where she was reunited with her husband until his death in 1873 and with her son until his death in 1879. Caricatures of Eugénie were produced and spread throughout France and England during this time and

she was depicted, usually with heavy jowls and droopy eyes, as the mistress of a brothel, a camel, a crane, a prostitute, a fish seller, a hen, and a variety of other debased figures and animals representing double entendres. Eugénie's Spanish heritage was used against her, and in France many of her early charitable projects and educational reforms were undone during the Third Republic. While this destruction of her character and reputation was underway, Eugénie was concerned only with two main occupations: petitioning the French government to restitute her personal collection and, after 1873 and 1879, memorializing her husband and son, first at St. Mary's at Chislehurst and later at St. Michael's Abbey at Farnborough. Thus, the book ends where it began, with Eugénie commissioning and working directly with an architect to create a sacred space.

As is often the case with a book of this size and depth, there are minor errors, but here these seem to have been primarily editorial. Some repetitiveness is found between chapters (some personages, such as the duc de Morny and Marcello, are discussed in one place and then later again as if they had not been mentioned before), and only selected secondary sources are listed in the bibliography, thus leaving out some important texts mentioned in the notes. At the risk of pointing out something personal, I noticed that my own book on Marcello and that by Henriette Bessis, do not appear in the bibliography, even though they are both mentioned in several notes.^[1] However, McQueen has produced a valuable, readable, jargon-free text that will be appreciated by scholars of French history, art history, women's studies and many other fields. With the publication of McQueen's book, Eugénie has regained her rightful place in the history of nineteenth-century art and politics, to which she can now be clearly seen as a key figure in this history. It is apparent that McQueen has spent the last decade working diligently not only to restore Eugénie's reputation, but to reposition her as a crucial advocate for the arts, education, social justice and her husband's legacy during the almost twenty years she was empress and during fifty years that she lived after the fall of the Second Empire. McQueen has unquestionably reestablished Eugénie's reputation for future generations.

NOTES

[1] Caterina Y. Pierre, *"Genius Has No Sex": The Sculpture of Marcello (1836-1879)* (Geneva: Editions de Penthes, 2010) and Henriette Bessis, *Marcello, sculpteur* (Fribourg: Musée d'art et d'histoire de Fribourg, 1980).

Caterina Y. Pierre
CUNY-Kingsborough Community College
caterina.pierre@kbcc.cuny.edu

Copyright © 2011 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.

H-France Review Vol. (Month), No. XXX.