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Iris Moon, *The Architecture of Percier and Fontaine and the Struggle for Sovereignty in Revolutionary France*. Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2017. Xiv + 185 pp. Figures, bibliography, plates and index. £110.00. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4724-8016-3.

Review by David P. Jordan, University of Illinois at Chicago.

The French Revolution destroyed the luxury trades. The patrons of domestic and public beauty fled the country. The king's brothers and his aunt were the first *émigrés*, soon followed by the nobility: no more townhouses would be built and decorated for years; no more country houses would be commissioned. The Ecole Militaire, begun in 1752, became the last public building. The Place de la Concorde, inaugurated in 1763, was the last public square and it would become the place of execution. Architects, artists, and a vast and specialized army of artisans were put out of business. A few, Jacques-Louis David most notably, adjusted to a revolution they welcomed. Those who could not join, leave, or find work sank into misery. Anatole France's hero of *Les Dieux ont soif*, the artist Evariste Gamelin, painted the designs on playing cards to eke out a living. Charles Percier and Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine were part of the revolutionary generation, the latter born in 1762, the former two years later. They were not driven into penury or radical politics but they could not practice the art for which they had trained.

They met in 1779 in the studio of the architect and academician, Antoine-François Peyre (le jeune). "I immediately made the first sincere pact of friendship with him," said Fontaine, which "endured for more than fifty years" (p. 13). Only Percier's death ended this unique collaboration. They were in Italy together after Percier won the Prix de Rome in 1784. Fontaine placed second the next year and joined his friend. They returned to France, then in full revolution, in 1790 and tried to work. Architecture was impossible. They scratched out a living doing theatrical design and got a commission from the revolutionary government redesigning space in the Louvre to accommodate the Convention Assembly that began life in the Manège, Louis XV's indoor riding stable. After the fall of the Montagnards (1794), small commissions picked up and it became thenceforth impossible to disentangle the work of the partners. They worked for Pauline Bonaparte and her husband General Leclerc in 1798, restoring the hôtel Chauvelin, and got to know Joséphine de Beauharnais. The following year, in December, a month after the *coup d'état* which ended the Directory, David introduced Percier and Fontaine to the First Consul, Napoléon Bonaparte. They were hired to transform Malmaison, the run-down country house in northwest Paris which Joséphine and Napoléon had just bought. Their future and fortune were secure.

Fontaine went on to be in charge of the imperial apartments in the Tuileries, Saint-Cloud, and Fontainebleau, the principal palaces used by Napoléon. He and Percier also did work at Versailles,

Rambouillet, Compiègne, Strasbourg, and Mayence. They worked on creating the great museum of the Louvre which Vivant Denon filled with the plunder of Europe, and were in charge of work on the rue de Rivoli, the most important street cut the center of Paris through by Napoléon. They arranged the *grandes fêtes* and ceremonies of the Empire, beginning with the *sacre* in 1804, followed by Napoléon's marriage to Marie-Louise (1810), and the ceremony of distributing the eagles that followed four days later and is brilliantly depicted by David. Fontaine became Napoléon's chief architectural adviser: the emperor had neither the eye nor significant taste for architecture (or painting), but he had the good sense to listen to those who did. In 1813 Fontaine was named "premier architecte de l'Empereur." Percier never held an official title, but until his death in 1838 all this work was done together. Fontaine retained his position and honors until his own death in 1853, but never again enjoyed the authority and prestige he had under Napoléon.

The partners were ideally complementary. Fontaine was personally charming and extroverted, good at business (he managed the accounts), quick to grasp problems as part of an entire project and, as the son of a man who designed and built fountains, he knew how to organize the work and keep it running smoothly and on time. He also had the gift of translating the most ambitious and passionate desires of clients into reasonable solutions. Percier was more introverted and scholarly. A great draughtsman and water colorist, a designer of genius and a master manipulator of several media (fabric, wallpaper, paint, fresco), he was also a wizard at melding antique and Renaissance modes and styles to create a distinct style, eventually dubbed 'Empire.' All of this he preferred to do from his studio. It is Fontaine who became Napoléon's favorite and Percier who designed the interiors. Jean Tulard, among others, considers Percier the more original talent, overshadowed, not by Fontaine's artistic gifts, but by his superb social ease.[1]

Malmaison presented formidable problems. "The gardens are pleasant," Fontaine wrote in his *Journal*. [2] "The site is beautiful. The house, as well as all of its dependent buildings, is awful" (p. 131). Napoléon and Joséphine, however, presented more difficulties. He was imperious, yet indecisive. A man astonishing for his ability to make snap judgments under fire, who never hesitated, dithered, or changed his mind, he was anxious and indecisive when it came to architecture and decoration. Fontaine's *Journal* is a fundamental source for this other Napoléon. He was also penurious: Malmaison was transformed on a shoestring. Joséphine was the opposite. She spent money with stunning ease and insouciance, and knew what she wanted. At Malmaison, she insisted on having an English garden, dotted with picturesque ruins, a chalet, and exotic plants, a project never definitively realized. By the time Percier and Fontaine "were asked to cease work on Malmaison [in 1802]...more money had been spent on all of the piecemeal refurbishments than it would have cost to build the new pavilions that they had originally proposed" (p. 135). Even after the divorce, Napoléon continued to pay for her transformations. He also continued to complain about the expense.

I provide these biographical details, and will flesh them out with some historical details, because they fix the place, time, and personalities of important artistic careers. Professor Moon is little concerned with such information, perhaps assuming these details are well known. Her interesting and, in many ways, original study is neither biography nor history. Art history, as Professor Moon practices it, is a discipline with its own conventions. Her title, *The Architecture of Percier and Fontaine and the Struggle for Sovereignty in Revolutionary France*, tells us little about the contents and argument of her book although it contains her thesis. We don't learn much about revolutionary France except for a few brush strokes as background. The vast question of

sovereignty in the French Revolution is hardly touched, and what she understands by sovereignty remains opaque. Metaphor often stands in for argument, evidence, and analysis.

Chapter two, "Propulsion and Residue, Constructing the Revolutionary Interior," opens with a long analysis of an anonymous print of 1790, *Moyen expéditif du peuple français pour démeubler un aristocrate* that Camille Desmoulins reproduced in his *Révolutions de France et de Brabant*. The print depicts the courtyard of the Hôtel de Castries strewn with elegant shattered furniture and household items, while more is being thrown out the windows by looters. The revolutionary deconstruction of a noble interior. It is a disquieting scene. Vandalizing the luxury and beauty of the domestic arts of the ancien regime, one of the great ages of elegance, is not the most gratifying image of the French Revolution; Desmoulins, Jean-Paul Marat, and René Hébert would have celebrated it as 'the just anger of the people.' There are many hundreds of prints of revolutionary street violence which form a vast visual repository of sources of the French Revolution. Professor Moon argues that "the force of this image resides precisely in its ability to convey" how "the hurling of fine things through space dissolved static architectural forms into crumbly thresholds and sites in transition." [3] She goes on: vandalism enacts "at once an Enlightenment philosophy of radically swirling matter...at the same time that the image hails destruction's forward trajectory into the concatenation of revolutions to come (in 1830, and 1848, and again in 1871) (p. 37). The plain language of mob violence would have been adequate and accurate.

This discussion introduces the first steps of Fontaine and Percier as architects in revolutionary Paris. They became the pre-eminent masters of interior decoration, not so much by choice as from circumstance. Not only were noble houses stripped of their beautiful worldly goods, but the houses themselves were sometimes razed; chilling reminders of the destruction of the ancien regime. There would eventually be a lot of work for architects, but not of the kind they most desired. Virtually no domestic building went on in the years of revolution, and the moratorium extended to public buildings and spaces. Percier and Fontaine did not design and build anything new and significant until the arc du Carrousel (1806), once Napoléon exercised imperial power. Fontaine did not design a new building, ironically, until the Chapelle Expiatoire (1815-1826), ordered by the restored Louis XVIII to memorialize his guillotined brother. [4]

Chapter three, "The *Recueil de decorations intérieurs*, Furnishing a New Order" is central to Professor Moon's thesis and the work of Fontaine and Percier. In 1801, they began issuing the first plates of the *Recueil*, a project that would continue until 1812 when they provided an important retrospective essay. "Historians of the decorative arts," she reminds us, "have repeatedly emphasized that stylistically speaking, nothing new distinguished Percier and Fontaine's antique-inspired designs of the Directory period from the styles that emerged under Louis XVI" (p. 63). An obvious assertion of continuity in the arts. Moon wants to modify this "static picture" and insists the *Recueil* presents "inherent representational instabilities" that announce "a new attitude toward history and style, a narrative in which fashion, industry, and other forces threaten to liquidate the authority of architecture and the classical past." (p. 69) I'm not persuaded of these grand assertions, but the years from 1801 to 1812, from the Consulate to the Empire and the Russian catastrophe, are momentous. The age of Napoléon was revolutionary, the art commissioned to celebrate the Emperor's remaking of France and redrawing the map of Europe kept pace or was in the vanguard. Percier and Fontaine sought to create some order by cataloging "archaeologically exact interiors and furnishings rooted in the classical past," (p. 38) but they were not compiling a museum catalogue.

Professor Moon takes a stab at linking the codification of the laws (the Code Napoléon) with the *Recueil* (p. 71). The effort fails and remains a metaphor. The Code removed the accumulated clutter of centuries of laws, eliminated contending systems of law—generally speaking the Roman tradition in the south, the Germanic tradition in the north, and a strong dose of Royal statute law and Canon Law everywhere. The *Recueil*, much more modestly, tried to codify taste by simplification and abstraction. It is essentially an Enlightenment project, a kind of *Encyclopédie* of fashion. Its influence was enormous. The line drawings, mostly by Percier, serve as a handbook for all who would transform the inherited housing stock of the ancien regime. Once building returned, the *Recueil* became an authoritative guide to the tasteful, smart, historically authentic, and fashionable. It also offered a defense against the greed, philistinism, and deception of developers. In an age when the ersatz was replacing the real, when plaster was made to look like marble, paint like granite, and *trompe l'œil* established itself as a clever style, Fontaine and Percier's work celebrated what was worthy and historically significant. Chapter four, "The Platinum Cabinet, Luxury in Times of Uncertainty," makes the case in reality that the *Recueil* makes on paper. The platinum cabinet, designed and built with the very finest materials, by the greatest artisans, was commissioned by the Spanish king, Charles IV. It cost a fortune. The mounting hardware for the exquisite wood panels were cast of platinum, hence the name. This prohibitively expensive small room had no practical purpose except to dazzle, and was reserved for the royal family.

Professor Moon is at her best the farther she is from the fads and jargon of current art history analysis and writing. Percier's drawings, she writes, "were the last images of the original state of Fontainebleau's ballroom before it was destroyed...to make room for new renovations." His 98 drawings of the original state of the chateau are "intricate and meticulously annotated watercolor studies" recording the various stages of transformation and what has disappeared (pp. 59-60). The same can be said of his rare renderings of the Basilica of Saint-Denis and the Châteaux d'Anet and Gaillon (both of which were razed) (p. 56). Professor Moon observes that the identity of the nobility that had been "fixed in seigneurial rights and inalienable ties to the land" and which disappeared in the Revolution, was replaced by "the mercurial personalities of Directory society" and wealth from capital and movable properties. In this new world, "the furniture and objects designed by Percier and Fontaine sought to endow quickly renovated habitations with a sense of permanence and to naturalize the spaces as if nothing were in fact movable" (p. 110).

Speaking of "the delicate containers and exquisite furnishings that brought a sense of ritualized etiquette to the campaign" (p. 144), she unfortunately cites Emil Ludwig's biography as an authority, neglecting the dozens of more recent and reliable biographies, none of which are in her bibliography. Her discussion of tents in Napoleonic decoration and propaganda, beginning with Malmaison, would have benefitted from some mention of the Russian campaign. General de Caulaincourt's *Mémoires*--the relevant section is translated [5]--describe how Napoléon went to war like a pasha, dined off fine china using silverware emblazoned with his coat of arms, in his elaborate tent of several rooms. He also drank Chambertin, his favorite wine, with dinner, and kept a personal stable of dozens of horses, until he had to jettison all this luxury during the ghastly retreat.

Professor Moon's considerable erudition is largely confined to the work of Percier and Fontaine and addressed to art historians. She often neglects historical perspective. I missed the perspective of Timothy Wilson-Smith's excellent *Napoleon and his Artists* (not in her bibliography) where the

same chronological period is covered, the artisans as well as the artists and architects, but in this case, is enmeshed in a sophisticated chronological and historical approach.[6]

NOTES

[1] See Tulard's article on Percier in his *Dictionnaire Napoléon*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1999). The relative strengths of the two architects described above is generally accepted.

[2] Only fragments of the *Journal, 1799-1853*, 2 vols. (Paris: Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts, 1987) were published before 1987. The *Journal* is a capital source for the work of Fontaine and Percier and their interactions with Napoléon and Joséphine, and a splendid account of architecture and the domestic arts under the Consulate and the Empire.

[3] Moon, p. 37, quotes with approval Erika Naginski's "eloquently argued" treatment of this print. The book in question is *Sculpture and Enlightenment* (Getty Publication: Los Angeles, 2009).

[4] See Moon, "Coda, Revolutionary Atonement", pp. 155-162 for a full discussion.

[5] The second half of Caulaincourt's second volume, *L'Ambassade de Saint-Petersbourg et la Campagne de Russie* (Plon: Paris, 1933), is translated as *With Napoleon in Russia* (William Morrow, New York, 1935). No translator, alas, is credited. There are additional details in Dominic Lieven, *Russia Against Napoleon* (Viking, New York, 2010) and Marie-Pierre Rey, *L'effroyable tragédie: une nouvelle histoire de la campagne de Russie* (Flammarion: Paris, 2012).

[6] Timothy Wilson-Smith, *Napoleon and his Artists* (Constable & Robinson: London, 1996).

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