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Iris Moon, *The Architecture of Percier and Fontaine and the Struggle for Sovereignty in Revolutionary France*. Abingdon, Oxon and New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2017. xiv + 185 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. $149.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4724-8016-3; $147.96 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-3153-1628-4.

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Iris Moon's *The Architecture of Percier and Fontaine and the Struggle for Sovereignty in Revolutionary France* began life as an MIT doctoral dissertation under the title: Ornament after the Orders: Percier, Fontaine and the Rise of the Architectural Interior in Post-Revolutionary France (2013). This shift is worth noting, not only because of the shift of time period from the first decades of the nineteenth century to the revolutionary decade raises questions about the relationship of the most famous team of architect/designers of the time to larger socio-political events, but because it also indicates a shift from a study of more purely formal architectural questions of ornament and the orders of architecture, to the relationship between architecture, power, and the nature of government in one of the most studied and most complex periods in modern history. Yet Moon's book is, in fact, primarily about the Napoleonic period rather than the decade following the events of July 1789, events which both Charles Percier and Pierre Louis François Fontaine knew only second-hand as both were pensionaries of the king, Louis XVI, at the French Academy in Rome in 1789 and did not return to Paris until 1791 and 1790 respectively. The remainder of their careers would only belatedly play out as laureates of the Grand Prix de Rome had come to expect over the course of the eighteenth century, with a relatively assured ascendancy to an official position in state or royal architecture. Like Bonaparte, they would need to come up with strategies for advancing their careers in changing circumstances. This would include publishing their work in new ways that had not been part of their own training. It might have been fascinating to allow these trajectories to play out in parallel and thus to allow the promised theme of sovereignty, in fact little addressed by Moon, and authorship, one of her main foci, to develop in dialogue. But these themes are only briefly addressed, and strangely only in the final chapter on Percier and Fontaine's famous commission for the house and garden at Malmaison, originally commissioned by Napoleon and Josephine, and later, by the rejected Josephine. Rather Moon's book is organized into a series of case studies of a diverse range of practices from printing to stage design to interior design, all of which play with the tension between the transportable and the permanent, one of many subthemes introduced episodically across this loosely structured study.

The architects Charles Percier (1764-1838) and Pierre-Francois-Leonard Fontaine (1762-1853) established a practice that became, even in its own time, synonymous with the Napoelonic

Empire, most famously for its erudite revival of the style of linear ornamentation associated with Pompeian interiors, rediscovered in the 18th century, and for a firm command of the imagery of the Roman empire that lent itself to expansionist imperial hubris. Their influence was prodigious throughout Europe and beyond, to such an extent that their work long stood in for an entire period in the style handbooks that were once a mainstay of art history. Yet, in fact, Percier and Fontaine had begun their friendship, and even their artistic innovations, already as young designers in the waning days of the ancien regime.

Percier and Fontaine explored many markets and avenues in the 1790s as young professionals trying to navigate an unstable society. Eventually they played an increasingly official role in crafting the very image of the Emperor, although the precise nature of their individual contributions to their partnership is very hard to tease apart. Fontaine alone would be named *premier architecte de l'Empereur* in 1804, while Percier would increasingly try to maintain the balance between the team's lucrative private work and was more engaged with teaching a whole generation. Attempts to discern an individual hand in the partnership have rarely succeeded, from the Comtesse Biver's 1964 biography of Fontaine to a recent exhibition devoted to Percier alone mounted by the team's most recent biographer, Jean-Philippe Garric, in 2016. Moon refuses this difficult enterprise in a first chapter on the nature of their friendship and collaboration, even if she sheds little new light on a relationship perhaps intentionally clouded by secrecy and characterized by a small cohort of other close associations like that of the third man in their shared grave at Père Lachaise cemetery, Louis Bernier. But the confusion in Moon's shifting titles [1] is not the product of a lack of scholarly clarity, but rather directly reflects the core aim of her densely compacted and strangely sequenced set of case-study chapters: namely, how a pair of architects, joined by a bond of romantic friendship first professed during their time in Rome, navigated the radical political shifts, sometimes almost from year to year, as designers of everything from furniture to buildings in newly emerging private markets set against the backdrop of revolutionary, and then Napoleonic tumult. The big shift comes when, several years after they set up a practice divided between fashionable interiors, publishing, and teaching, they came to grasp opportunities that emerged with the establishment of a militant Empire eager at once for legitimacy and novelty.

Periodization of the Revolution has long been a subject of debate, and indeed much of Moon's study concerns the role of Percier and Fontaine as designers in relationship to the rise of Napoleon and the spread of his control from Paris to a good part of the European continent, a set of ambitions as grandiose as they were fragile and ephemeral. Her main thesis is laid out clearly at the outset: "Through their works in decoration...Percier and Fontaine sensed that instead of absolutism's concentration in monumental structures, modern representations of sovereignty depended upon the dispersal and multiplication of the images of authority into a variety of mobile forms, whether it was in furniture, textiles or prints. A process of replication and reproduction would thwart, at the very least defer destruction" (p. 4). In addition to the fact that this sense can only arise with the transition from the Directoire to the Consulat and seems odd at the outset of a book on the Revolution, it remains forced for reasons that go to the vexed issue of periodization. On the one hand, the assertion of authority through print culture had long been a feature of rulership, practiced as much by the Bourbons in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as by Napoleon in his invention of a modern imperial France. On the other, Percier and Fontaine moved continuously between official commissions and private practice for clients in a marketplace whose rules had been to some large measure recalibrated by the revolutionary

decade. It was indeed that very private practice that would be redeployed in response to Napoleon's aspirations to craft an imperial city of Paris.

Scholarly literature on Percier and Fontaine has been sparse until very recently, despite their centrality to all accounts of architecture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in France, and to a certain degree in Europe, the influence of their publications throughout the Napoleonic empire and beyond, and the spread of their pupils as far afield as Russia and Brazil. Scholarship was largely documentary rather than analytic and mostly dedicated to perpetuating two myths: that little happened in architecture in the tumultuous decade following the events of July 1789, and that the duo were the authors of Napoleon's tremendous transformation of Paris into a permanent stage set for the enactment of empire, embodied in such grand acts as the creation of the rue de Rivoli with its straight axis and repetitive arcades. This began to change in the late 1980s with a flurry of research in the lead-up to the bicentennial of the revolution. Still, as late as 1987 in the *Histoire et dictionnaire de la Révolution française 1789-1799*, edited by the famed historian of the Revolution, Jean Tulard, the short entry on architecture in totality reads: "Quand on fait la guerre, il n'y a pas d'argent pour construire des palais et faire de l'urbanisme; sinon à coups de canons. Vignon commença le Temple de la Gloire (la Madeleine). L'Empire le termina, comme il commandita Brongniart, constructeur de la Bourse. La colonne Vendôme, l'arc de triomphe du Carrousel, l'arc de triomphe de l'Etoile (terminé en 1840), sont des réalisations de Napoléon, non de la Révolution, qui fut stérile en architecture."[2] It would be hard to find another source at once so concisely rich in misinformation and perceptions in the age before Wikipedia. For, in fact, the appropriation of ecclesiastical and aristocratic property in the 1790s was to make the final years of the century into one of comprehensive moments of the interior and exterior remodeling and repurposing of properties, giving rise along the way to whole new types of urban architecture. Best known were the commercial arcades built across the gardens of former aristocratic gardens on the Right Bank, and the arcade streets created by requirements on deeds of sale. Even the rue de Rivoli, designed by Percier and Fontaine, was not built by government or imperial fiat, as so often assumed, but by scores of individual property owners over a very extended period, all obliged to follow a template created by the architects who would go on to stage the rise of the Empire in both temporary festival decors and then in neo-Roman urban markers such as the triumphal arches before Napoleon's remodeled Tuileries Palace and at the Etoile. A fundamental re-evaluation of this period began with a series of studies not only on the unrealized paper architecture generated by such events as the Concours de l'An II, or on the revolutionary festivals as spatial design and practice, but also the extensive remodeling of existing buildings of such new institutions as the Musée des Monuments Français, in which Percier was to play a key role, the Louvre Museum, or the various seats of legislative deliberation. More recently, the primary research and astute analyses of Jean-Philippe Garric on the production of Percier and Fontaine's plate books from the 1790s on has opened the study of their work in relationship to changing economic contexts and to the sources of a style later misleadingly labeled the "Style Empire," since most of its elements had been articulated long before 1804.[3] It was Garric who determined, for the first time, the complex printing history of Percier and Fontaine's books, beginning with the *Recueil de décorations intérieures comprenant tout ce qui a rapport à l'ammeublement* of 1801, noting the use of different colored papers and the existence of hand-colored copies appealing at once to different sectors of rapidly changing markets for fashionable interiors.

Moon's contributions are not archival, for there are few new discoveries here. Rather her contribution is to suggest conceptual framings for reading Percier and Fontaine, not as authors

of an autonomous evolution of style, but in relationship to the shifting political and social terrain of the transition from the Directory to the Consulate and to Empire--and even to the Restoration when Fontaine's major free-standing work, the Chapelle Expiatoire (1815-1826), was commissioned as a private expiatory memory site by the restored monarchy, the subject of Moon's "Coda." Her chapters are at once rewarding, as they offer interpretative insights, and maddening, in their continual shifts of focus, their lack of illustrations related to sustained visual analyses, and their frequent resort to fashionable tropes of recent art history often rendered in tortured and torturing sentences. For instance, in one chapter on the legendary Platinum Cabinet for the Spanish crown--which seems rather extraneous to the main argument--we learn that it "participates in a material poetics of permanence that functions by way of a precision of parts, whereby modular aspects of assembly and reassembly sought to preempt a process of forced dispersion where broken-apart and cast-off fragments could not be made whole again" (p.120). Key arguments are often lost from view for quite a while; it is worth underscoring them as they have greater potential than Moon is able to exploit. Among the most provocative is the notion that, in this period, the interior became not a place of privacy, but one of publicness, even as public commissions virtually disappeared until Napoleon's power was consolidated. "The redecoration of interiors became a politicized and collective form of architectural practice, publically debated and contested" (p. 6), Moon notes, as she launches into the complex connections between Percier and Fontaine's private clients and their work as publishers of designs. On the one hand, they would create something proprietorial for individual wishes, on the other, they published these works as calling cards to attract new clients, even offering them up as models for competitors on the marketplace of what we would today call "design services."

A chapter on the revolutionary interior draws connections between the vibrant world of the theater freed from ancien régime censorship. But as is often the case with the large-scale themes grandly announced at the outset of each of these chapters--the whole book has much residue of the type of "stage directions" that so often characterize doctoral dissertations--, this promise remains unfulfilled, even as it is punctuated with portentous claims. "Revolutionary work consisted of producing a range of genre-bending things in a radical simultaneity of production" (p. 52), remains just one mysterious claim for me followed by a short offering of a theory of revolutionary furniture: "Like the museum and its newly acquired role as a stable repository of culture, the furniture of the interior became the primary means through which the fluctuating economic values of the period were for the moment arrested, domesticated and made to signal a way of life." Beside the fact that the changing valences of the theatrical displays in Lenoir's Musée des Monuments Français, with which Percier was involved, are key sites for tracking shifting ideological positions, the precise meaning of this claim about the relationship between furniture and economy remains elusive.

Some clues are provided by the central chapter of the book, which deserves to be expanded to a book-length study. Moon argues very convincingly that the addition of a theoretic text to the influential *Recueil* in 1812 not only changed the valence of the project, but marks a radical shift in the designers' attitudes towards the marketplace of fashion. While the *Recueil* contributed to the early success of the architects and to their international influence, as Moon argues, "the perceived threats posed by fashion and its ability to reproduce forms ad infinitum without the regulation principles established by an architectural authority forms one of the primary concerns of Percier and Fontaine's lengthy and idiosyncratic preliminary discourse." Although her comparison of the call for order in their text to the Code Civil goes undeveloped and seems thus a toss-off idea as a parallel, it points to the paradoxical shifts in the two men's views as their

stylistic innovations and fluency became increasingly servants of Napoleonic propaganda. Moon has discovered an early--isolated?--instance of one of the plates being taken up in a woman's fashion magazine, but we don't learn much more about the extent of this phenomenon or about the magazine in question. Percier and Fontaine's increasing anxiety about precisely what a plate book makes possible, and their discourse against vulgarization in the 1812 text are fascinating. Moon does not here specifically tie the timing of the text to the evolution of the Empire after Napoleon's large-scale changes, ranging from changing his wife to his military and urban strategies after 1811. However, it is indeed after 1811 that their key architectural projects, not taken up here, from the Palace for the King of Rome to the projects for the development of a government quarter on the Right Bank, were drawn up. Even more odd is the absence of any reference to the period's debates over copyright and authorship in this discussion of the erosion of traditional authority for architectural forms, a long-standing claim of historians of the transition from the ancien régime to the more economically liberal regimes of the nineteenth century.

The "struggle for sovereignty" of the title is never really explicitly addressed until some final passages of the book and then only in some rather speedy borrowings from Agamben. But it does come into focus on a very fascinating visit to the well-known work at Malmaison that spans the relationship between the designers and Napoleon. Here the political reading of a "perpetual stage of emergency" is both hauntingly germane and ripe with potential to put into the promised state of dialectical tension between the ephemeral and the monumentally permanent announced in the preface. A marvelous archival find about Napoleon's repurposing of tents used for royal festivities for private and military purposes provides a much more interesting frame for an iconographic/political reading of Percier and Fontaine's famed tent room in the country residence of the Premier Consul. Moon notes, in a line potent with possibilities for reading the imperial role of these decorators borrowed from the fashionable realm of revolutionary interiors: "we can begin to see how Napoleon's requisition and repurposing could slide from a carnivalesque momentary standstill of daily life into a permanent suspension of norms" (p. 140). This is the only mention of the carnivalesque, and a rare discussion of suspension of norms. Throughout, Moon offers tantalizing insights to raise our appetite for a comprehensive political reading of Percier and Fontaine's interlaced careers, one that could even carry these figures further into the next political shifts they were to survive from Bourbons to Orleans in the long revolutionary century.

NOTES

[1] In the author's biography, which Moon supplied as a contributor to the indispensable 2016 exhibition catalogue of the Bard Graduate Center for the Study of Decorative Arts and which covers the pair much more comprehensively than Moon's book, she announced the then forthcoming book as *Percier, Fontaine, and the Politics of the Empire Style, 1785-1815*, a version of the title happily abandoned since few would be able to pinpoint which Empire corresponded to those dates. See Iris Moon, "Documenting the *Recueil de décorations intérieures*" and "Two Commodes" in Jean-Philippe Garric ed., *Charles Percier: Architecture and Design in an Age of Revolutions* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 122-134 and pp. 180-183, respectively.

[2] Jean Tulard, Jean-François Fayard, and Alfred Fierro, *Histoire et dictionnaire de la Révolution française 1789-1799* (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1987).

[3] Jean-Philippe Garric, *Recueils d'Italie, Les modèles italiens dans les livres d'architecture française* (Sprimont, Belgium : Mardaga, 2004), pp. 127-164; Garric, *Percier et Fontaine, Les architectes de Napoléon* (Paris: Éditions Belin, 2012); and Garric, ed., *Charles Percier, Architecture and Design in an Age of Revolutions* (New Haven: Yale University Press [for the Bard Graduate Center, New York], 2016), p. 124.

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