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Jean-Philippe Garric, ed., *Charles Percier: Architecture and Design in an Age of Revolutions*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017. 304 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-3002-2158-9.

Review by Caroline van Eck, Cambridge University.

The work under review is published as a companion to the exhibition devoted to Charles Percier shown in Fontainebleau and the Bard Graduate Centre in 2016. It is an interesting hybrid between a catalog and a multi-authored monograph, in which the catalog entries are interspersed with chapters dealing with Percier's life, times, and work. Perhaps the most innovative aspect, and certainly the most arresting at first sight, is that Charles Percier (1764-1838) here is severed from his lifelong friend, companion, and business associate, Pierre François Léonard Fontaine (1762-1853). Having met in the atelier of Pierre François Peyre before they went to Rome as laureates of the Prix de Rome awarded by the Académie Royale d'Architecture, they formed the most influential firm of architects active in the years 1790-1815. They designed furniture, interiors, ephemeral festivities, and urban interventions, and worked for the Consulate, the Empire, and in the case of Fontaine, for the restored Bourbon monarchy as well. The rue de Rivoli is their invention, as is the triumphal arch in the Tuileries, the interior decoration of Napoleon and Josephine's residence of La Malmaison, and the remodelling of the staircases flanking the Colonnade of the Louvre. They also designed small-sized objects such as medals, table services, chairs, mirrors, washstands, and dining services and published collections of images of Roman palaces. Their *Recueil de décorations intérieures* (Paris, 1801-1812) not only disseminated their designs across Europe and the US, but is also one of the first artistic treatises to engage with the phenomenon of fashion as a major factor in design and the acceptance of stylistic innovation by the public.

Until this exhibition, Percier and Fontaine were always considered as a tandem who worked together so closely that it was often difficult to say which one was responsible for a design or its execution. On the basis of previous work and the research for this exhibition and volume, Jean-Philippe Garric is now able to put a convincing case for a much stricter division of labor in their studio. Percier was the designer and rarely went out, whereas Fontaine took care of commissions, looked after clients, and oversaw the building or manufacture of their designs. Another major innovation of this eminently research-based book is that it shows, by concentrating on Percier's career and development, the broad scope and stylistic diversity of his production. It ranged from urban architecture to illustrations of editions of Horace or Jean de la Fontaine, but also included restoring the damage done during the Revolution to the Gothic royal tombs at Saint-Denis, and transforming the Couvent des Capucins into the Musée des Monuments Français. A major coup is the inclusion of the recently rediscovered designs for Madame Récamier's hôtel on the rue du Mont-Blanc in Paris (c. 1798, now demolished).

The team of contributors, which includes Jean-François Bédard, Jean-François Belhost, Anne Dion-Ternenbaum, Iris Moon, and Letizia Tedeschi, discuss Percier's education, teaching, activities as an architectural conservationist, engraver, furniture designer, and his work for the imperial couple, presented as the union of architecture and décor. There is also a substantial chapter on his unbuilt designs.

The main issue with Percier is how to situate him, as it is with the *Style Empire* as a whole, which he shaped to such a large degree. The *Style Empire* is characterized by the juxtaposition of Greek, Roman, Renaissance, and Egyptian features. This combination of various styles has led either to its dismissal as an eclectic mixture without a stylistic identity of its own, or to its reappraisal as a precursor of post-modernism with its interest in bricolage and anachronism. Discovering the hidden logic that determines the choice of styles and the arrangement of their elements, and understanding their meaning, particularly in Empire ornament, is one of the great challenges in studying French art c. 1800, and one that has rarely been taken up. In this book the issue of understanding what Garric and his team call Percier's eclecticism is not really investigated, with the exception of Letizia Tedeschi's attempt to develop a Nietzschean reading of his ornament. Instead, the book has much to offer on the uses Percier made of his Roman studies. During his five-year sojourn there after he had obtained the Prix de Rome in 1786, he collected a vast archive of drawings of Roman and Renaissance monuments that would become the reservoir of forms for his subsequent work. Thus, one can follow how Trajan's Column became an inspiration, how he transformed Renaissance ornament drawn in Fontainebleau, or how he included a very free copy of Piranesi's monumental candelabrum, bought by Louis XVIII for the Louvre, in his own designs. The book thus offers many instances of the ways in which Percier worked, of how he continued to draw, throughout his life, on the fund of images formed while in Rome and on his way there. It also suggests that underlying the wide stylistic range of his work, there is a fairly consistent design method, consisting of imitation, adaptation, and transformation of Greco-Roman and Renaissance sources, depending on the status of the patron, the function of the design, funds available, etc. His method stuck very close to the traditional advice of classical rhetoric and of the Académie, to follow the process of imitation and emulation, always guided by the precepts of *convenance* and *bienséance*.

This is a very plausible and long-held view, but there is a problem: In spite of its use of Greco-Roman forms, motifs, objects, and typologies, Empire art looks very different from previous incarnations of Greco-Roman art, and this is not at all explained by connecting it to the traditional classical view of design and style implied here in Garric's account of Percier's artistic education and working method. "Eclecticism," the term used most often in this book, does not really explain anything. Instead, it is the name of a problem: that artists combine elements from various styles, but apparently without a clear or consistent rationale. In the absence of theoretical statements by Percier or Fontaine about this issue, one can look only for examples of such stylistic behavior they may have followed, and this is where we touch on a conspicuous absence in this book: that of Piranesi. Percier admired him intensely, and imitated or transformed many of his designs. The Athénienne made by the Imperial goldsmith Biennais, for instance, after a design by Percier, is clearly inspired by Piranesi's design of a tripod included in his *Vasi, Candelabri e Cippi...*, (Rome, 1777), which in its turn was inspired by tripods included in Pompeian Alexandrian landscapes of the Third Style. Unlike Percier, Piranesi published several statements on ornament and design, in his polemic with Mariette or in the preface of his *Diverse Maniere di Adornare le Cammini* (Rome, 1769). Putting these statements and designs next to Percier's work might have contributed to opening up the notion of eclecticism, and replacing it by a more articulate view of Percier's design. In this context, it is also regrettable that no use is made of Odile Nouvel-Kammerer's pioneering essay on Empire ornament, which set out to face the challenge of understanding the hidden logic of Empire design. [1]

Altogether, though, this is an excellent and beautifully produced book on Percier, offering a very good overview of his production, published in French and English, so that much French scholarship is made accessible to the anglophone art historical community. Even though the analysis of Percier's work has left a few avenues of inquiry unexplored, it will certainly be the basis of any further work on him.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Susan Weber, "Foreword"

Jean-Francois Hebert, "Preface"

Jean-Philippe Garric, "Biography"

Saskia Wallig, "Chronology"

Thierry Sarmant, "Government and the Arts in France, 1789 to 1848"

Jean-Philippe Garric, "Percier Alone"

Jean-Philippe Garric, "The Schools of Percier"

Jean-Philippe Garric, "Percier's Ring"

Vincent Cochet, "The Atelier of Isabey"

Letizia Tedeschi, "The Roman Sojourn"

Charles Percier, "Letter to John Flaxman, November 1791"

Vincent Droguet, "The Château de Fontainebleau"

Georges Huard, "The Abbey of Saint-Denis, 1936"

Jean-Philippe Garric, "The Musée des Monuments Français"

Jean-Philippe Garric, "Graphic Art as Matrix"

Jean-Philippe Garric, "Percier under the Loupe"

Iris Moon, "Documenting the Recueil de Décorations Intérieures"

Letizia Tedeschi, "The Italian Edition of the Recueil"

Christophe Beyerle, "The Livre du Sacré"

Jean-François Belhoste, "Percier and François Honoré Georges Jacob-Desmalter"

Iris Moon, "Two Commodes"

Jean-Philippe Garric, "A Scrapbook from Percier's Workshop"

Anne Dion-Tenebaum, "Designs for the Manufactories and the Garde-Meuble"

Anne Dion-Tenebaum, "Two Tureens and their Variations"

Jean-François Bedard, "The Synthesis of Architecture and Décor"

Vincent Cochet, "Percier and the Imperial Couple"

Jean-François Belhoste, "Josephine's Boudoir, Château de Saint-Cloud"

Jean-Philippe Garric, "The Louvre and the Tuileries"

Charlotte Duvette, “The Arcades on the Rue de Rivoli”

Jean-Philippe Garric, “A Rhetoric of Unbuilt Architecture”

Jean-Philippe Garric, “Percier’s Legacy”

NOTE

[1] Odile Nouvel-Kammerer, *L’Aigle et le Papillon. Symboles des pouvoirs sous Napoléon 1800-1815*, Exhibition Catalog, (Paris: Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 2008), and *Symbols of Power, Napoleon and the Arts of the Empire style*, (New York: American Federation of Arts, 2007).

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