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Daniëlle O. Kisluk-Grosheide and Bertrand Rondot, *Visitors to Versailles: From Louis XIV to the French Revolution*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, University Press, 2018. xvii + 370 pp. Figures, catalogue entries, notes, works in the exhibition, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-58839-622-8.

Review by Elizabeth Rodini, American Academy in Rome.

My most recent visit to Versailles, in January of 2019, took me there from Paris on the RER C line in a train specially designed to set the mood for the spectacle to come. Plasticized photographs of lavish ceiling paintings festooned the car that I shared with my undergraduate students, all giddy to be making this pilgrimage to the ultimate place of instagrammable, rococo bling. The Hall of Mirrors! The king's bedchamber! Marie Antoinette! From our first approach to the chateau, with its blindingly gilded ironwork, to our last pass through one of its pastel pink giftshops, we were assailed by the over-the-top glamour of the modern Versailles brand. How reality met expectation, or fact met fiction, was fodder for discussion as we rode back to Paris, nibbling daintily on raspberry macaroons.

Our experiences were those of tourists in 2019, but as a class they were hardly new. As *Visitors to Versailles: From Louis XIV to the French Revolution* makes abundantly clear, we cannot fully understand the history of Versailles without taking into account the perspectives of those who visited it over the decades and reported their experiences to the wider world. The book's chronology ranges from the relocation of Louis XIV's court from Paris to Versailles in 1682 to the decline and fall of the monarchy in the 1780s. Because Versailles is so mythic and because so much of what we know of it is filtered through the impressions of outsiders, this catalogue--which accompanied an exhibition jointly organized by the Palace of Versailles and the Metropolitan Museum of Art--is an important addition to the literature.

Curators Daniëlle O. Kisluk-Grosheide and Bertrand Rondot have assembled an impressive panel of experts whose tightly distilled studies are grounded in primary textual materials that reflect the range of their subjects, from provisioners to ambassadors and including diaries, letters, and administrative records. High-quality images are plentiful, and annotated object entries add new information and perspectives to the essays, although, as indicated below, some essays dialogue more naturally and effectively with the paired catalogue entries than others. The overall structure of the book, including its thematic organization and the presentation of supporting information in an exhibition checklist and notes, is clear and well conceived.

Kisluk-Grosheide and Rondot lay out their program in an engaging introductory essay, "The

Incomparable Versailles.” Readers are immediately introduced to some of the book’s key themes, including the evolution of Versailles into a great stage with the primary goal of showcasing the king for the world, and the complex play of outsider and insider, of seeing and being seen, that defined but also complicated court life. The introduction offers methodological insights as well, underscoring the need for historians to toggle carefully between official court messaging and the impressions of visitors communicated in writing, imagery, and the manipulation of objects. It also points to the wealth of valuable information that lies in more neglected histories, particularly that of the infrastructure that supported the visitors, and to the danger of assuming any sort of fixity or stasis in the elaborate rituals of the court. Indeed, despite Versailles’s message of absolutism, readers come away with a good sense of the continual political and social recalibration that defined relations between residents at court and those that came to visit.

Colorful anecdotes abound, attesting to the enthusiasm of the curious, voyeuristic crowds. We read of visitors donning slippers to protect the floors of the king’s private quarters, of a near-sighted man who got too close to a porcelain vase and broke it, and of the thrill of finding Madame de Barry in her morning gown with “her hair undressed” (p. 13). In details such as these, the fourth wall breaks not only for the eighteenth-century visitor but for us, the modern reader. One British traveler, narrowly missing an encounter with Louis XVI in his inner apartment, was titillated by “those slight traits of disorder that shewed he *lived* in it” (pp. 12-13). We, too, are offered glimpses into a Versailles not easily accessed or appreciated.

One of the more successful strategies of both the opening essay and the book as a whole is the effort to lead us on a trip to and through the chateau, inviting us to watch the spaces unfold as a visitor might have done. Through letters recounting ambassadorial itineraries to the inner sanctum and details of minor but telling rituals of place (for example, the protocol for opening double doors depending on the rank of the visitor [p. 99]), we can imagine an embodied experience of passage that exceeds more familiar itineraries of iconography or ornament. Various maps and plans help guide us, though the addition of simple directional annotations would have clarified some textual references to place (north wing, south side, etc.) and made it easier to follow along.

This fruitful, quite literal approach to Versailles extends to the first section of the book, “Preparing to Arrive,” and Mathieu da Vinha’s essay “Going to Versailles,” which examines the infrastructure that evolved to accommodate the many visitors to the chateau, specifically modes of transportation and forms of lodging. In addition to providing important insights into the realities of eighteenth-century travel (something we can easily forget on a daytrip via the RER C), this approach begins to nuance the rather vague category of “visitor” in the book’s title, allowing us to see how those visitors got sorted out by wealth, title, and privilege even before arriving at court.

The next essay, “Exchanging Looks: Codes of Dress at Versailles” by Pascale Gorguet Ballesteros, picks up effectively on one of the book’s themes, namely the complex dance between observers and observed. Courtiers and visitors played both roles, and costume was key to their success. This essay also strains under some of the challenges that pervade any study of court culture, namely the difficulty of teasing apart what was from what was said, or, in this case, what was communicated by dress. As Ballesteros reveals, sartorial practices made it hard to tell who was an insider and who an outsider, complicating a study dedicated to the

experience of visitors (all presumably outsiders). This challenge extends to the very premise of the book. If each individual present at court is there at the whim of the king, might not any one of those individuals, save the king himself, be considered on some level a “visitor”?

Although the book does not tussle with larger questions of this nature, it does marshal subsequent chapters to nuance further the overarching category of “visitor.” In sections headed “Official Visitors and Gifts,” “Incognito Travelers,” “Tourists, Souvenirs, and Guide Book,” and “Americans at Versailles,” seven essays reveal the many reasons people traveled to Versailles and the complex ritual culture that attempted to put them in their proper place. In “Magnificent Display: European Ambassadorial Visitors,” Helen Jacobsen gives specificity to the generalized title of ambassador, explaining how hierarchy played out in access and experience, including the type of audiences that were afforded and the privileges that were granted. She does so in part by attending carefully to individuals, such as the Duke of Portland and the Doge of Genoa, as well as to notable women like the countess of Hertford and the strangely nameless wife of the Russian ambassador to Holland. Jacobsen’s essay is an important contribution given how often contemporary commentary treated the women at Versailles as a cluster of beautifully dressed props.

Meredith Martin’s essay “Special Embassies and Overseas Visitors” addresses the experiences of travelers from more far-flung locations—Siam, Persia, Issiny (modern Ivory Coast), the Ottoman court—and takes up the considerable challenge of assessing their impressions of Versailles based on scanty source material, mining not only texts but also objects and conventions. What these diplomats purchased (mirrors, carpets, garden imagery), practices they may have adopted (drinking champagne, printing books), and experiences they rejected (watching the king dine at the Grand Couvert) are mined as evidence for the success of Versailles at actually conveying French *Gloire* abroad (p. 110). In “Présents du Roy: Official Gifts from the French Court,” Corinne Thépaut-Cabasset digs deeply into the ledgers that recorded gifts to departing ambassadors, thus bringing clarity to this mechanism of exchange including the processes of gift registration and hierarchies of monetary value. More abstract matters, such as the power of royal *praesentia* in gifts received from the king and the endurance or flux in the value of a gift over time and across space, are hinted at but not examined in detail.

Volker Barth’s essay, “Incognito in Versailles, or How Not to Travel as a King,” examines the endlessly fascinating topic of hidden identities at court, teasing out the fictions within fictions for those usually elite travelers who, for motives both personal and political, sought anonymity on the road. Barth successfully conveys the game of shifting appearances and realities that individuals played as they moved in and out of their generally transparent disguises. Less successful is the relationship between this essay and the catalogue of objects that follow it, a sign that not every essay (see also that by Jean Boutier) translates smoothly into exhibition format.

Continuing in a downward hierarchical spiral, the subsequent two chapters introduce readers to other, often overlapping categories of traveler, including minor nobles, visitors on the Grand Tour, and local day trippers from Paris. In “Grand Tourists: Noble Visitors to the Court of the French Kings,” Boutier describes the preparations made for a visit, such as the rehearsal of courtly manners practiced at lesser courts in advance of arriving at Versailles. By examining the levels of access different visitors had once they got there, Boutier further parses the intricate social structure that Versailles both imposed and revealed (which verb is most apt is a

question worth pondering).

Elisabeth Maisonnier picks up on the same theme in her essay “Visitor’s Guidebooks and Engravings,” which investigates how the many circulating books and images of Versailles defined visitor expectations. That visitors knew Versailles before they even got there created yet another game of shifting identities, wherein their actual encounters did not always match the ones they had read about or seen in pictures. Maisonnier helps us understand how Versailles got weighted down in the stories about it, stories promulgated in outdated and error-ridden guidebooks. Some of the related catalogue objects—for example, a fan showing Louis XVI wearing a crown and carrying a scepter, something we are told he never actually did (cat. 132)—effectively illustrate the circulation of misapprehensions.

The final chapter of the book is particularly successful, perhaps because the outsider status of its subjects is so apparent. In Paul Staiti’s “The Americans,” we see most clearly how visitors were shaped by and responded to the culture they found at Versailles. Benjamin Franklin’s approach to dress (plain), speech (matter-of-fact), and gifting (serious) was clearly a way of talking back to the royal court. A compendium of key American documents translated into French and presented by Franklin to Louis XVI shows how the American was playing into protocol while also subverting it (cat. 166). For people like Gouverneur Morris, Versailles was an “object lesson in [the flaws of] monarchical society,” and yet he fawned over Marie Antoinette and bought some of her furniture at auction during the Terror (p. 299). As Staiti makes clear, Versailles galvanized the Americans’ identity even as their responses to it could be paradoxical and contrary. In this, Staiti’s chapter forms a neat capstone to the book, as a summation of its principal observations but also a measure of the ambiguities inherent in so much of its content.

The primary ambiguity at stake in *Visitors to Versailles* concerns what Versailles was and what the visitors at the center of this study expected it to be. To that end, one might have hoped for more engagement with the explosion of theoretical literature in the fields of heritage and tourism studies that could have bolstered ways of working intently between the representation of and encounter with a place.[1] Jean Boutier acknowledges Pierre Nora but, given the book’s larger theme of perception and, implicitly, the way places live on in memory and the imagination, more attention to this frame of reference—so fundamental to thinking about France through its major monuments—might have anchored deeper discussion of some of the slippery mythologies of the site.[2] For example, the still puzzling question of whether proper attire was a ticket to entry remains unanswered.

Admirably, *Visitors to Versailles* sets out to study the full social spectrum of visitors to the chateau, yet it gives little attention to the traces left by more modest travelers. There are various tantalizing nods to their presence, such as Horace Walpole’s mention of tourist wares sold inside the palace and a set of fancy souvenir buttons from the Musée Lambinet in Versailles that go beyond more familiar diplomatic gifts (pp. 280-81). Reports of visitors who were “not very well dressed” and those “whose rags betrayed them to be in the last stages of poverty” are similarly intriguing (p. 52). A tilt toward the elite is certainly understandable: historical evidence weighs heavily toward wealth and privilege, and this is an exhibition catalogue, thus built around the objects that survive and are of the greatest visual interest. Perhaps future scholars, working in other contexts, will be able to pursue some of these other trails more intently.

*Visitors to Versailles* is an enlightening study of a familiar and much mythologized monument. By focusing on outsiders, the book makes clear that official court messaging was only as effective as how it was received and promulgated beyond the chateau and its great gardens. Even today, stories about Versailles continue to multiply and fracture, like a metaphorical hall of mirrors. It is immensely helpful to have this scholarly reminder of where such stories originate and how they travel.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Daniëlle O. Kisluk-Grosheide and Bertrand Rondot, “The Incomparable Versailles”

Mathieu Da Vinha, “Going to Versailles”

Pascale Gorguet Ballesteros, “Exchanging Looks: Codes of Dress at Versailles”

Helen Jacobsen, “Magnificent Display: European Ambassadorial Visitors”

Meredith Martin, “Special Embassies and Overseas Visitors”

Corinne Thépaut-Cabasset, “‘Présents du Roy’: Official Gifts from the French Court”

Volker Barth, “Incognito in Versailles: Or, How Not to Travel as a King”

Jean Boutier, “Grand Tourists: Noble Visitors to the Court of the French Kings”

Elisabeth Maisonnier, “Visitors’ Guidebooks and Engravings”

Paul Staiti, “The Americans”

#### NOTES

[1] As an introduction, see Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013). Although “tourism” might be considered a modern term, theoretical work in this field raises questions of relevance to historical work as well. Two useful sources include John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1990) and, for a range of approaches, *Journal of Tourism History*, published since 2009.

[2] Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (1989): 7-24.

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