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Bette W. Oliver, *Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Le Brun: In Pursuit of Art (1748-1813)*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, and London: Hamilton Books, 2018. 108 pages, \$65.00 U.S., ISBN 978-0-7618-7027-2.

Review by Katie Hornstein, Dartmouth College.

Bette W. Oliver's biography of Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Le Brun is an informative, slim volume that describes an important part of the life and career of one of the period's most notable art dealers, whose role in art history has often been overshadowed by his wife, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, and her successful painting career. The ways that the era's turbulent political conditions shaped the couple's marriage and professional lives is one of the most compelling threads in the book. Another more general merit of the study is how it uses the life of Pierre Lebrun to tell the story of the transformations that took place in the Parisian art world of the Revolutionary era. Oliver examines how Lebrun attempted to leverage his professional identities as a dealer, art administrator, archivist, and restorer to secure a steady stream of assignments for himself within France's fledgling arts institutions, especially the Musée central des arts and later, at the Musée Napoléon. Lebrun is depicted in the book as a savvy and sometimes petulant operator, who "almost always managed to support the political faction that was leading at any given time" (p. 20). While Lebrun's life is hardly a model of noble commitment to a political cause, it offers a valuable example of how ordinary French citizens negotiated the upheavals of the Revolutionary era, when opportunities were often fleeting, job security was in short supply, and adaptability was always required.

The book focuses on Lebrun's life between the Revolution up through his death in 1813. As a biography, it is not comprehensive, since it pays only passing attention to Lebrun's *ancien régime* biography, when he was the keeper of pictures for Louis XVI's brother, the comte d'Artois, and for the duc d'Orléans. Oliver does not account for this choice, which leaves the reader wondering why Lebrun's family background, early career as a dealer and as keeper of royal art collections, and the first years of his marriage do not merit inclusion in his biography. Giving a fuller picture of Lebrun's life before the Revolution would have helped Oliver develop a sense of his shifting commitments in terms of clientele and business practices before and after 1789.

The book is organized chronologically and is divided into eight chapters that span Lebrun's middle age up through his death in 1813. Chapter one, "Surviving the Revolution," deals with Lebrun's precarious professional and personal situation between 1792 and 1794. It examines the steps that he had to take to save his assets and his life after his wife fled France as an *émigré*

in the early phase of the Revolution in the autumn of 1789. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's name was added to the list of *émigrés* in 1792, owing to her royalist convictions and close ties to her most prolific patron, Marie-Antoinette. In a bid to protect himself, Pierre defended his wife's absence in a pamphlet by claiming that she had gone to Italy to practice her art and that her decision to leave France had nothing to do with politics. By 1794, the political order of the day meant that it was no longer possible to stay married to an avowed royalist. Lebrun divorced his wife, though the two stayed in contact during her exile and she continued to send him money. The second chapter, "The Connoisseur at Work," examines Lebrun's contributions to the study of Northern European art with his three-volume *Galerie des peintres flammands, hollandais et allemands*, a magisterial illustrated book featuring 201 engravings and arranged in a modern system by school and chronology. Oliver also dwells here on Lebrun's gallery, where in addition to Northern European painting of the past centuries, he exhibited contemporary French artists, including Louis-Léopold Boilly and Marguerite Gérard. Buried at the end of a paragraph about Marguerite Gérard's oeuvre is the fascinating fact that Lebrun served on the jury for the painting competition sponsored by the Committee of Public Safety in 1794 to commemorate the events of the Revolution.

Chapters three, four, and five all address Lebrun's tireless attempts to advance his interests in the wake of the Revolution and up through the first Empire. Between 1792 and his death in 1813, Lebrun leveraged his expertise as a picture dealer, appraiser, cataloguer, and restorer to find positions where he might be useful, though his efforts were often rebuffed and he never had the stability or recognition that he craved from the rotating cast of officials who hired him. Lebrun's close ties to Jacques-Louis David provided him with a position on the Revolutionary arts committee, the Commune des arts, which charged him with compiling the inventories of the dissolved royal academies of art and science. Later, in his capacity as an administrator in the Musée central des arts, Lebrun arranged works of art in the Louvre galleries, drafted inventories, but did not, according to Oliver, have a hand in restoring works of art as he had wanted. After Dominique Vivant-Denon took over in 1802 as director of Paris museums, Lebrun had a more difficult time finding positions with French government institutions, though he was still called upon as a consultant. Subsequent chapters describe Lebrun's attempts to sell his works in a market that was unsettled by war and glutted with masterpieces due to the emigration of France's nobles and the dispersal of their collections. Oliver's considerations of Lebrun's frustrations at the state of the post-Revolutionary art market are an important contribution to our understanding of the effects of political upheaval on the practices of buying and selling art.

Several chapters describe Lebrun's involvement in the selection, administration, restoration, and installation of confiscated art works during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Lebrun acted as an inspector and cataloguer of the convoys once they reached Paris and was also dispatched to Belgium and Spain to help select works of art to bring back to Paris as war booty. He sought further opportunities to go out into the field and was indignant when his requests, such as his demand to be sent to Italy, were refused. Oliver's strategy is to describe the nature of Lebrun's work with the looted objects. However, she does not pose critical questions about Napoleon's war machine, except at the very end of the book, when she turns to the afterlife of Lebrun's inventories of seized artworks in the twentieth century in chapter seven, "The Last Word." In this chapter that is otherwise dedicated to describing Lebrun's position at the end of his life and Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's unflattering description of him in her memoir, Oliver discusses the ethics of wartime art plunder. Here, she describes how

Lebrun's inventories of seized art "have helped provide background information" on Nazi art seizures during World War II (p. 68). She forthrightly condemns the Nazis for using art seizure as a strategy of war, but all but excuses the French seizures, which arguably set a modern precedent for some of the Nazis' own practices. Oliver is hesitant to reflect critically on the French confiscations or delve into objections to the practice by the period's tastemakers such as Quatremère de Quincy, who decried the spoliation of Italy. Instead of viewing the plunder as a part of a larger strategy of wartime violence, Oliver interprets it as a boon for Lebrun's professional fortunes and for the French national museum in general (p. 69). In an earlier section where she describes the downfall of the First Empire and the end of the confiscations, she reflects on their value to France and claims that "Napoleon's policies," "greatly benefitted the national museum and library" and "managed to unite France within its borders, creating a sort of enforced harmony" (p. 51). This is a strangely rosy picture for an era of nearly continuous European warfare, in which soldiers and civilians of all walks of life and from every territory in Europe (France included) suffered greatly. If France's museums were populated with art treasures from all over Europe, it certainly came at a human cost.

Oliver's deep dive into archival sources at the Archives nationales, the Bibliothèque nationale, and the Institut national d'histoire de l'art allows her to offer a nuanced account of Lebrun's life that makes this book a valuable contribution. Less illuminating are the portions of the book where she gives historical and art historical context. These sections, which are interspersed within all of the book's chapters, often have the effect of separating historical events from Lebrun's biography. Stand-alone paragraphs summarize complex political and artistic transformations in an overly general and unsatisfying way. This problem is compounded by Oliver's reliance on a small selection of secondary sources, some of which could be considered a bit outdated. Sources that stand in for the history and art history include the catalogue for the 1975 exhibition, *French Painting, 1774-1830: The Age of Revolution*, Owen Connelly's *French Revolution and the Napoleonic Era* from 1979, and Cecil Gould's *Trophy of Conquest: The Musée Napoléon and the Creation of the Louvre* from 1965.[1] Andrew McClellan's important study, *Inventing the Louvre*, is also cited abundantly.[2] Recent art historical studies and cultural histories of the period are not in Oliver's bibliography, which is dominated by sources from the 1980s and 1990s. There are some surprising omissions, such as any work by Philippe Bordes on Jacques-Louis David or Bénédicte Savoy's recent book on French art seizures in Germany.[3] Oliver's summary handling of the historical complexities of the period may be due to the fact that this book is geared toward a non-scholarly audience, but this might even make the case more urgent for a more attentive effort to use Lebrun's life as a way to narrate the history of the period. For example, Napoleonic scholars may bristle at obfuscating sentences like: "Notwithstanding his humiliating defeat and exile, Napoléon's contributions have been celebrated in France ever since" (p. 66). First names of artists are also sparsely given, which occasionally leads to confusion as in the case of Joseph Vernet and Horace Vernet: for example, only their last names are used when Oliver is talking about the two different artists on the same page (p. 67). Factual errors also occur, such as when Oliver writes that Jacques-Louis David was made first painter to Napoleon during the Hundred Days (p. 67), rather than in 1804.

As with other aspects of Lebrun's career, including his work as a gallery owner and his involvement in compiling inventories and arranging paintings in the Louvre, Oliver addresses his involvement with confiscations chronologically, so that each short chapter deals with all of these various professional commitments as a group. This can have a disorienting effect on the reader, especially when there are scant transitions between paragraphs or section breaks within

each chapter to give a reader a sense of how the text will flow. The picture that emerges from Oliver's biography is that of Lebrun's dogged persistence to participate in French artistic life at the national level and as an art dealer for the private market. Readers who are looking for a case study of how the art world worked from these two different perspectives will find Oliver's book fascinating.

## NOTES

[1] *French Painting, 1774-1830: The Age of Revolution* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1975); Owen Connelly, *French Revolution and the Napoleonic Era* (New York and London: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979); Cecil Gould, *Trophy of Conquest: The Musée Napoléon and the Creation of the Louvre* (London: Faber, 1965).

[2] Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[3] Bénédicte Savoy, *Patrimoine annexé. Les biens culturels saisis par la France en Allemagne autour de 1800*, 2 vol. (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2003); Philippe Bordes, *Le Serment du Jeu de Paume de Jacques-Louis David. Le peintre, son milieu et son temps de 1789 à 1792* (Paris, Éditions de la Réunion des Musées nationaux, 1983); Régis Michel and Philippe Bordes, *Aux armes et aux arts! Les arts de la révolution française* (Paris: Éditions Adam Biro, 1988).

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