

James E. McClellan III, *Old Regime France and its Jetons: Pointillist History and Numismatics*. New York: American Numismatic Society, 2020. xiii + 268 pp. \$100.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-089722-362-1.

Review by Jeffrey S. Ravel, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Every Monday morning at eleven o'clock for most of the eighteenth century, the members of the Comédie-Française acting troupe were supposed to assemble to deliberate on their artistic and financial affairs. The actors and actresses, many of whom had little enthusiasm for administration (not unlike academics today), needed extra motivation, which the Comédie provided in the form of *jetons d'assemblée*. These were tokens worth three *livres* up to 1757 and six *livres* thereafter. In one six-year period, from 1755 to 1761, the company spent an average of 5,870 *livres* per year to bribe its members to attend the weekly assembly.[1] I suspect that most Old Regime specialists reading this review will have a similar passing acquaintance with the usage of *jetons* in various institutional settings. Jean le Rond d'Alembert, for example, famously developed a reputation as a *jetonnier*, or a mercenary who only showed up at sessions of the Académie française to collect his attendance tokens.

One of the great merits of the new book by James E. McLellan III, however, is to make clear the surprising ubiquity of *jetons* in Bourbon France. From the halls of Versailles to the assemblies of provincial estates to the meetings of royal academies and trade guilds, *jetons* were everywhere. They were used not only as compensation for attendance at tedious meetings, but also as New Year gifts and symbols of honor and prestige to be exchanged in official ceremonies, wrapped at times in elegant silk purses. The history of French *jetons*, McLellan asserts, allows him to proceed like a nineteenth-century "pointillist painter," "evoking via an illusion of dots a fleeting image and a passing feeling, in this case for the whole of French society and culture as they developed over time up until the French Revolution" (p. 209).

McLellan, a historian of Old Regime science and technology well known for his work on scientific societies in the metropole and the colonies during the eighteenth century, came to this topic in a roundabout way.[2] In the preface he recounts that one day in the 1980s, leaving the Richelieu site of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, he wandered into a coin shop near the Bourse subway station to see if the proprietor might have specimens of the *jetons* distributed to members of the Royal Academy of Science in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He emerged with a relatively inexpensive piece bearing a portrait of Louis XIV. Thus was born a passion for frequenting coin shops, eBay, and other venues that led him to amass a *jeton* collection numbering around 750 specimens (p. x). McLellan curiously admits to a certain amount of guilt about this habit, which he worries might be dismissed by his professional colleagues as an antiquarian interest. He also defends his engagement with numismatics, which is highlighted in the subtitle of the book. The work of these specialists in coinage and medals often goes unnoticed by academic historians laboring in periods after Antiquity and the Middle Ages, and McLellan himself acknowledges that numismatic scholarship is often focused narrowly on the material objects, without broader context. But there is no reason for McLellan to

lose sleep over these concerns. His collector's passion for the topic enriches his argument, especially given that most of the jetons illustrated in the work come from his collection. And he succeeds in sharing the detailed archival work of the numismatists he has consulted, while also making the larger historiographical stakes clear. The book itself is a tribute to the benefits of collaboration between historians and numismatists--the handsome, folio-sized volume produced by the American Numismatic Society on luscious paper stock is a marvelous material object.

The author begins his account by distinguishing jetons from other, similar metallic objects that bore images and inscriptions. Jetons were not coins, which had monetary value authorized by the crown or ecclesiastical or noble authorities. For the most part jetons were not accepted as legal tender in marketplaces or financial venues, although they could occasionally be redeemed for officially minted coins. Jetons were also distinct from medals, although both objects were often cast in royal mints, particularly the Monnaie des Médailles. Medals were struck to commemorate notable events, especially during the reign of Louis XIV and the early reign of Louis XV in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At times, the imagery and inscriptions on jetons resembled the markings on medals, but the latter were usually manufactured with greater care, yielding clearer and deeper impressions. Jetons bore the greatest resemblance to *méreaux*, thin tokens of tin or lead issued by local cathedral chapters to choir members, priests, and brothers to encourage them to attend church services.

Although McLellan focuses mostly on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, his story begins around the year 1200 on the counting tables of merchants and government officials who used unadorned jetons to calculate transactions in a manner similar to an abacus. By the late Middle Ages, jetons had also become a perk for royal office holders, who would receive them in packages of 100, ostensibly to use on the counting table, but increasingly as a status symbol and reward for fidelity to the crown. By the sixteenth century, the practice had migrated to the offices of the city administration of Paris and to provincial estates, as well as the Conseil du roi and other royal bureaus not directly involved in fiscal affairs. By 1600, the massive amounts of silver and gold distributed as jetons to office-holders symbolized the increasing power and prestige of the centralizing state. As McLellan puts it, "what started out as little counting tokens to a considerable degree ended up reflecting the structure and functioning of Old Regime France" (p. 50). He estimates that between 1589 and 1789, somewhere between fifteen and twenty million jetons were produced and distributed throughout the kingdom and its colonies.

By the second half of the seventeenth century, Louis XIV would hand out purses of jetons to his royal guests at Versailles and the other royal residences in and around France. In addition, at this point it became customary at court and eventually elsewhere to hand out little bags of jetons as New Year gifts, or *étrennes*. Government agencies, academies, and provincial estates would send their representatives to Versailles to give the king and his top ministers luxurious purses of highly-designed and lavishly produced jetons, and the New Year practice took hold in the provinces as well. In the eighteenth century, the *Mercure Galant* would publish engravings of the most notable jetons distributed every January, and in the years around 1700 parlor games of the elites focused on interpreting the more subtle or obscure images and inscriptions found on the tokens. Jetons were also distributed to the crowds gathered to celebrate important official events, such as royal weddings or the *sacre du roi* at Reims Cathedral at the beginning of each new reign.

McLellan divides the institutions in which jeton distribution and gift-giving became a common practice into three categories: government agencies, royal academies, and guilds. The chapter on governing bodies is an encyclopedic survey of the halls of power at court, the Hôtel de Ville in Paris, and various provincial settings. Among many facts, we learn that the Compagnie des Indes issued jetons in the 1750s in Canada that featured beavers, corn, and indigenous peoples, some of which may have been given to tribal leaders. The city of Paris awarded them to employees as diverse as engineers, plumbers, Swiss guards, and town criers. In the world of the royal academies, the Académie Française led the way, issuing jetons to its members to encourage attendance at meetings as early as 1673. Jetons handed out at the Royal Academy of Science changed little in appearance over the course of the eighteenth century, featuring the Latin inscription *invenit et perficit* (“it discovers and perfects”) above a seated Minerva with emblems of scientific inquiry in the background, including the Royal Observatory.

Provincial and colonial academies and agricultural societies followed suit. Among the guilds, before the late 1500s the tradesmen had distributed *méreaux*, the church tokens, to their members and supporters, but after 1600 they also began designing and commissioning their own jetons. Corporations as varied as the brewers, the shoemakers, the pastry chefs, the acrobats, and the rod fishermen of the Seine all produced and distributed their own jetons in the final two centuries of the Old Regime. They were joined by Chambers of Commerce throughout the realm, who used them to curry favor with important institutions and powerful individuals. Archery clubs distributed them as prizes in shooting competitions, and Masonic lodges may have used them in initiation ceremonies and as tokens of sociability and friendship. The only major institutions that apparently did not participate in “jeton culture” were the kingdom’s universities and its *parlements*, the highest law courts, for reasons that elude the author’s meticulous investigations.

The final two chapters of the book detail the work of the two bodies that designed and produced most of the jetons of the Old Regime during its final century and a half, the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, and the Monnaie des Médailles, or the mint for royal medals. The former, founded in 1663 as an offshoot of the Académie Française, had acquired a monopoly over the design of jetons for government agencies by the beginning of the eighteenth century. The academicians created Latin *devises*, or inscriptions, for the reverses of jetons, and suggested graphic designs that were then implemented by the engravers at the mint. The obverse of the tokens usually featured a bust of the reigning monarch. Their work, like that of the Monnaie, accelerated in the months of November and December as they received commissions for *étrennes* at the start of the year. The Academy’s renown was such by the end of the eighteenth century that the Congress of the newly formed United States approached it twice in the 1780s to request inscriptions for gold medals to commemorate the heroes of the American Revolution. Throughout the final half of the eighteenth century, medals, jetons, and the design sketches that preceded them were frequently on display at the *salons*, or biennial art exhibits, in the Louvre Palace.

Once the inscriptions and images had been finalized at the Academy of Inscriptions, they were sent to the Monnaie, which had secured its monopoly on the production of both jetons and medals for the crown at the end of the sixteenth century. In 1609, this mint was relocated to the right bank of the Seine in a stretch of arcades alongside the Louvre Palace, where it remained

until the Revolution. McLellan unequivocally calls it “the best mint in the world...the most technologically advanced, artistically inclined, and sophisticated minting operation anywhere” (p. 173). It featured a team of talented engravers who would translate the work of the academicians at Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres into metal dies that would then be placed in the *balancier*, or pressing machine. Laborers would swing the large arms of the *balancier* that in turn drove the screw press down onto the metal blanks, imprinting the image on the die into the blanks. Teams operating these machines could produce several hundred jetons an hour, although production of royal medals using the same technology was slower due to the need for more detailed finishes that required several strikes. By the start of the eighteenth century, the Monnaie had become a well-known tourist destination; in 1717 during his visit to Paris, the Russian tsar Peter the Great asked to swing the arms of the *balancier*, and he was so fascinated by the machinery and the mint’s collection of metal casts, medals, and jetons that he returned unaccompanied a week later to study them in greater detail.

The jeton, like many other aspects of Old Regime society and culture, did not survive the transition to the modern world intact. The highly designed New Year gifts and luxurious purses of jetons designed to curry favor with the powerful in prerevolutionary France lost their high-end qualities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They became poker chips, subway and telephone tokens, or objects used for admission to parking lots or public toilets. McLellan claims that these contemporary uses have inevitably obscured the significance of the Old Regime jeton. He is undoubtedly correct, and yet he may go a step too far in arguing that the history of jetons, told in a pointillist vein, “depict[s] the whole of French society as it developed over the centuries” (p. 19). His story is nevertheless suggestive, and cultural and social historians would be well-advised to consult this work as they consider any number of intriguing historiographical problems. Jetons, for example, have a role to play in current considerations of French monetary practices between John Law’s failed Mississippi Company of the late 1710s and the equally disastrous attempt at the end of the century to create monetary value via paper *assignats*.<sup>[3]</sup> The meanings of jetons in the many Old Regime contexts evoked by McLellan may help explain the trust placed in coinage rather than paper currency over the course of the century. Jeton design, intended for the most part to enhance the prestige of the monarchy and the institutions upon which it rested, deserves to be studied alongside other visual and textual representations of Bourbon royal authority. Given the massive production and widespread circulation of these tokens, they almost certainly inserted themselves into the political unconscious of the king’s subjects. Such considerations will profit from McLellan’s exhaustive examination of the numismatic literature on jetons, and his panoramic view of their uses across the kingdom and in its colonies before the Revolution.

## NOTES

[1] See the Excel spreadsheet available at the end of Thomas M. Lockett’s online article, [“Financial Difficulties and Business Strategies at the Comédie-Française During the Seven Years War”](https://cfrp.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/financial-difficulties-and-business-war) in Sylvaine Guyot and Jeffrey S. Ravel, eds., *Databases, Revenues, and Repertory: The French Stage Online, 1680-1793* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020). URL: <https://cfrp.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/financial-difficulties-and-business->

[strategies/release/1?readingCollection=7cdd7667#i-the-internal-administration-of-the-comdie-franaise-in-the-1750s](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4344444)

[2] James E. McLellan III, *Science Reorganized: Scientific Societies in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); James E. McLellan III, *Colonialism and Science: Saint Domingue in the Old Regime* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992; rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); James E. McLellan III and François Regourd, *The Colonial Machine: French Science and Overseas Expansion in the Old Regime* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011).

[3] On the *assignats*, and the intersection more generally between monetary value and material culture in eighteenth-century France, see Rebecca L. Spang, *Stuff and Money in the Time of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

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