
H-France Review Vol. 21 (March 2021), No. 27

Noémie Étienne, *The Restoration of Paintings in Paris, 1750-1815: Practice, Discourse, Materiality*, translated by Sharon Grevet with forewords by Timothy P. Whalen and Mauro Natale and afterword by Dominique Poulot. Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2017. xiv + 302 pp. Illustrations, notes, biographical dictionary of restorers, bibliography, and index. \$69.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-60606-516-7.

Review by David O'Brien, University of Illinois.

This volume is an English translation of a book originally published in French as *La restauration des peintures à Paris (1750-1815): Pratiques et discours sur la matérialité des oeuvres d'art* in 2012 by the Presses Universitaires de Rennes. This fact and the new, encomiastic foreword and afterword written by art-history luminaries Mauro Natale and Dominique Poulot, respectively, suggest the success that the book has already enjoyed in its previous incarnation. It is a well-deserved success.

Étienne addresses the period from 1750 to 1815, which has long been seen as key to the emergence of modern methods of painting restoration. As Étienne notes at the beginning of her book, however, most histories of restoration are strongly teleological, chronicling a seemingly ineluctable progress toward present-day practices. They also tend to focus narrowly on restorers and those immediately associated with them: artists, dealers, patrons, museum professionals, scientists, and the like. Étienne's study is different: it incorporates new approaches to materiality and emphasizes discussions and exhibitions of restoration that were emerging in the public sphere. She draws important conclusions from the social circles and changing professional identities of restorers and relates changing restoration practices to broader cultural shifts. Her conclusions are based on meticulous research into administrative records, sales catalogues (including their marginalia), account books, official publications, the physical evidence provided by art works themselves, as well as treatises on art and restoration, journalism, art criticism and other literary responses to art.

The book is divided into three parts, comprising nine chapters in all. The first part addresses the emergence of a distinct professional identity for restorers. At the beginning of the period in question, restorers often also worked as artists, dealers, or copyists. Without a guild, their exact status was unclear, as was their precise place between the mechanical and the liberal arts. Their professional secrets and their inventions (when they were recognized as such) raised their prestige, but even as they achieved general recognition as a distinct profession, they were seen merely as technicians, not as artists. Different types of restoration work also carried vastly different levels of prestige and fared differently over the course of the period covered by the book. Étienne emphasizes the vicissitudes of the occupation—constantly changing and never in one

direction. Rather than a triumphant march toward professionalization and institutional progress, restorers negotiated myriad social forces and experienced frequent changes in status, though over time the secretive aspects of their practice gave way to public displays and statements about methods. The establishment of the Musée Central des Arts in 1793, with its demand for restorers, its publicity, and its national prestige, soon allowed them to define a unique and autonomous role. In addition, their work was now overseen by connoisseurs working for the museum, not by the artists in the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture who had judged it under the Ancien Régime.

Part II covers the many complex judgements surrounding the restoration of art works. For example, paintings could look too clean or not old enough after restoration, depending on individual and period tastes. Those retouching or infilling paintings worried about preserving or recreating the “hand” or “spirit” of the artist. Paintings were spoken about as living beings that could “die,” or be “brought back to life,” “buried alive,” “tortured” and “wounded” (p. 81). Work on the support was generally less controversial than interventions on the surface, and these two aspects of the artwork were sometimes seen as separate things: the surface was a two-dimensional image whereas the support was a three-dimensional object. The transfer of the surface of paintings from a wood to a canvas support was not invented in this period, but it became a common practice and was always the subject of great attention and controversy. Varnishing and its many attendant qualities—how opaque or clear, how matte or reflective, how refractive—was also much discussed. Craquelure and brushstrokes could be destroyed by transfer and ironing. Removal of paintings from architectural supports and surrounds, as well as the adjustment of paintings to new architectural environments, was another disputed practice. Paintings increasingly were seen as separate from the architecture they adorned, but their integrity—in particular, the notion that they should not be cut down or enlarged—was increasingly valued. Many were moved from their original locations to the museum. Throughout her account, Étienne foregrounds the ways in which critical and theoretical understandings of paintings both determined and were determined by the technical interventions of restorers. Intellectual discourse and material practice were inseparable, Étienne argues.

The final part of the book addresses the display of restored paintings and the effects of publicity on restoration practices. Étienne chronicles how restored works were exhibited in workshops, museums, galleries, cabinets of amateurs, and at the Academy of Saint Luke. Transfers were sometimes staged in the homes of amateurs, and sometimes restorations or transfers were shown only half completed. The effects of various interventions (e.g., cleaning, infilling, overpainting, transfers) and the reputations of certain restorers on the monetary value and aesthetic quality of paintings was much discussed by dealers, amateurs, and, increasingly, museum professionals. Writing about restoration began commonly to invoke the judgements of the public, and by the turn of the century, Étienne demonstrates that this public was not simply rhetorical, but was given the opportunity to view restorations and register its opinion. The publicity of restoration lent it an ever more political character.

Here as elsewhere in the book, two moments emerge as crucial: the transformation of the Luxembourg Palace into a museum beginning in 1750 and the opening of the Musée Central des Arts in 1793. Both events, but especially the latter, had marked effects on the practice, discussion, and display of restored works. With the arrival at the Musée Central des Arts of art works confiscated from royal and religious collections or looted from around Europe, restoration took on important political meanings, as this institution was now the keeper of the nation’s collection

and, ostensibly, the best caretaker of the greatest artistic achievements of all mankind. As Étienne demonstrates, criticisms made mostly by foreigners in the late 1790s that the museum was not taking proper care of its collection led directly to innovative displays of and official publications about restored art works in the early 1800s, when the museum became the Musée Napoléon. In the ensuing discussions, French restorers became widely regarded as the best in Europe.

The Restoration of Paintings in Paris, 1750-1815 is packed with new information gleaned from painstaking research in diverse published and unpublished sources. Perhaps for this reason it is something of a difficult read, as Étienne's many characterizations of various aspects of restoration are supported by numerous citations from her copious research. The proofreading is incomplete, but the illustrations are good, and key works are reproduced in color. There are also an excellent bibliography, a very helpful biographical directory of restorers, and an index.

The numerous sources, the interdisciplinarity, and the ambition behind this book can hardly be praised enough. It takes up so many topics and arguments, however, that some seem underdeveloped or prematurely curtailed. For instance, in a number of places Étienne uses responses to restoration techniques to illuminate the ways in which art was viewed. One such argument makes a fascinating connection between Diderot's attitudes toward varnishing and his ideas about how a painting should properly be viewed (pp. 103-5, 131). In response to a debate about whether varnishes should aim for a glossy or matte finish, Diderot advocated for a technique that gave the latter, claiming that it tempered or dampened colors, interposed a veil or talc-like film between the painting and the viewer, harmonized tones, and allowed the painting to be taken in as a whole, without disturbing reflections of light. According to Diderot, shiny varnishes constantly reminded viewers of the materiality of the surface and therefore disturbed the illusion. As Étienne points out, this resembles Diderot's famous assertion that a painting should appear to ignore the viewer, allowing the viewer to feel that the scene was not specifically designed for her, an attitude that Michael Fried has argued is key to understanding modern attitudes toward painting. Étienne rightly concludes that this example demonstrates how imbricated thought and material experience are; it is impossible to say whether Diderot's speculations about painting led him to his observations about varnish, or if his experience of varnished painting further developed his theoretical formulations, and probably it was a bit of both (p. 112). Étienne's insight comes, however, in a flash and is quickly left behind, as perhaps it has to be, because her main goal in the chapter is to cover all of the various attitudes toward varnishing that she uncovered.

As another example, consider this statement from the conclusion of the book: "Initially rhetorical, the community of viewers emerged as an actual 'public' after the Revolution. The legitimacy it progressively achieved determined what was to become its primary function: judging the quality of restorations and praising or condemning the restorers" (p. 247). Presumably, Étienne means that the public had been increasingly given opportunities to judge restoration work and could even be identified with actual individuals or groups. And yet, invocations of the public are almost always to some extent rhetorical: the public may be constructed in markedly different ways (e.g., oppositional, homogenous, class-based). One suspects more could be elicited from the various images of the public that were proffered in relation to restoration during this period.

Finally, Étienne rightly emphasizes the role played by objects and materiality. Indeed, the book is so intensely engaged with material aspects of experience that it should be required reading for anyone interested in the material turn. Nonetheless, some of the thornier problems raised by the

new materiality are left to the side. Following the work of Daniel Miller, Étienne speaks of “the agency of objects and displays in a particular political context” (p. 240), but is the tying of agency to a political context here necessary because objects and displays only have agency as a result of the ways in which they are used by humans? Many of the examples in the book suggest that agency is the result of humans’ uses of or reactions to objects—that is, the agency is human and only apparently belongs to the object. Is there a form of agency that does not require something like life, power, intentionality, or morality? It is one thing to say that materiality and meaning cannot be separated, but it is another to say that a book, painting, or rock has agency.

As I hope these examples make clear, one of the strengths of the book is that it raises more questions than it can answer. It should be a goldmine for future research. While highly specialized, it contains much that should be of interest not just to art historians, restorers, and conservationists, but also to historians, anthropologists, and all students of French culture in this period.

David O’Brien
University of Illinois
obrien1@illinois.edu

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ISSN 1553-9172