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Charlotte Guichard, *La griffe du peintre: la valeur de l'art (1730-1820)*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2018. 355 pp. Figures, notes, index of topics, and index of names. €31.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-02-140231-5.

Review by Paula Radisich, Whittier College.

Charlotte Guichard is a French art historian who has written a fresh, innovative study about a deceptively banal and artless topic: the painter's signature. She asks how the name of the painter become such a sign of symbolic and commercial value. There is no car named the Voltaire or the Sartre, but there is a Citroën called the Picasso, which uses the artist's signature as its logo (p. 11). Clearly Citroën believes that Picasso's name affixed to this automobile will trigger the desire to acquire it, a notion Guichard will track all the way back to eighteenth-century Paris.

The art at the center of her study is easel painting, an art so familiar to us as to appear unproblematic in its brief; yet easel painting is an artefact of Western art "historiquement et culturellement construite" (p. 24). This assertion puts Guichard on the path of an anthropology of the easel painting (p. 23). To propose an anthropology of the easel painting, she declares, is to interrogate the capacity of the object to act on those who produced it, those who behold it, those who possess it and those who manipulate it (p. 23). The easel painting thus construed lies at the center of an inexhaustible, infinitely expanding network of social relations. With these objectives in mind, Guichard has composed an essay "sorti du cadre" (p. 303), combining theory and history, visual culture and art history. Linking the parts into a whole are three vectors outlined in the introduction: the value of a name, a history of the signature, and an account of this strange cultural artefact, the modern easel painting (p. 24). The organization of the book toggles between these vectors more or less chronologically, alternating between what Guichard calls synthesis with sections devoted to the analysis of the signature in specific paintings.

Easel painting had triumphed over the fresco and the altarpiece in the fifteenth century, and during the place and the period that is the focus of the book--Paris from 1730 to 1820--would overcome its last competitor, the monumental decorative panel, and "s'imposer[ait] comme objet de luxe" (p. 24). As is well known, Parisian society in the 1730s fell sway to a historically unprecedented pursuit of fashion and costly novelties; however--and this is what bears repeating--members of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture did not regard the status of easel paintings primarily as merchandise.[1] They defined easel painting as a repository of thought (p. 302). That was a given. The new dimension invented by the likes of Jean-Siméon Chardin and his most brilliant academic colleagues would be to reformulate easel painting as a material object

in which esthetics consciously interfaced with the market, often playfully, at this new site of the signature.

Before the eighteenth century, French painters did not usually sign their paintings. Nicolas Poussin, for instance, only signed five out of more than ninety canvases (p. 309, n. 3). He expected the value of his paintings to be measured by his talent, according to the norms of Renaissance humanism. Guichard reveals how Chardin, in contrast, defined his creative output differently, pointing to a salient detail unusual for the time—the artist’s cursive signature visibly inscribed on over two-thirds of his paintings. The name, often situated squarely in the middle of the canvas, became a powerful sign of Chardin’s authorship and identity.

Two systems of authorship existed in the world of eighteenth-century French painting. In large studios like François Boucher’s, anonymous assistants executed works issued under the name of the master. Nonetheless, at least with Boucher, even this system veered toward the modern concept of brand, which readily identified output from Boucher’s studio. Boucher’s brand imagery consisted of a repertoire of iconographic motifs reproduced in other media for the luxury trades, such as porcelain manufacture or tapestry design.

Guichard’s main interest, however, is in the other Enlightenment system of authorship—the Chardin model, founded on the significance of a presence expressed by the trace of the hand in an autograph signature on the painted object. Underpinning this formulation is the term *griffe*, the word that figures in the title of the book. *Griffe* is richly nuanced allusion to the signature, or more properly speaking, signature style / master’s touch. It is a metaphor drawn from the animal world meaning claw, or scratch, that is used today in the discourse of *haute couture* to refer to a designer label. Its origins lie in an old Latin phrase “*Ex ungue leonem*” (*You may judge the lion from its claw*). Denis Diderot used this saying in 1769 to describe aspects of a still life subject by Chardin, specifically to draw attention to the painter’s unique *touche* that only Chardin could reproduce (p. 21). In the *Encyclopédie*, *griffe* referred to marks designating quality in silversmithing. Then in 1798, it is said to indicate a technical instrument “avec lequel on met l’empreinte d’un nom, au lieu de la signature propre” (p. 22). In addition, the royal signature was reproduced by a stamp dubbed *la griffe* on administrative paperwork connected to the certification of paper money and the assignat. This assortment of referents, Guichard argues, lays the foundation for the concept of a material device in which the force of authority, the mark of authenticity and the sign of identity will converge (p. 22). That device will be the signature of the painter.

Chapters three, four, six, and seven are case studies of the signature’s meanings in specific paintings. In these chapters, Guichard demonstrates how artists consciously deployed their signatures—manifesting “le statut réflexif et même théorique du nom dans le tableau” (p. 30)—putting the signatures to work toward various ends in or on the composition, calibrating appearance, position, wording, and calligraphy. She discusses, for example, three multiples of Chardin’s genre painting *La Pourvoyeuse* in which his cursive signature appears in the same place, in the middle of the picture next to the elbow of the servant. In two of them, however, he signed chardin/1738, while in the third, apparently painted later, he inscribed chardin/1739. Obviously Chardin meditated on his signature, which is very deliberately worked in this example to take account of changes in the date. By means of this conspicuous detail woven into the center of the composition, Guichard concludes, Chardin ensured that all three owners of a painting representing exactly the same thing in exactly the same way had evidence of an authentic

Chardin. Chardin invented a clever visual device to mediate the contradiction between “l’original multiple” (p. 96). This is how the painter innovates, reasons Guichard: far from simply submitting himself to the market, Chardin, canny artist that he was, exerted remarkable agency to shape it (p. 101).

During the second half of the eighteenth century, Jean-Honoré Fragonard elaborated the concept of the painter’s *griffe* into a playful, mischievous acting-out of his individuality (p. 13). Guichard describes Fragonard’s *Figures de fantaisie*, a series of paintings completed around 1769, as a painted performance of the gesture aimed at a circle of intimates. In several of these paintings, Fragonard hides his cursive signature under layers of pigment, a tease inviting beholders to look for it. When they find it, they will be amused to discover the signature varies with each performance. His name is signed “frago 1769” in *Portrait de M. de la Bretèche dit aussi La Musique* (Paris, Louvre), then “fraggo or fraago” in *Portrait de jeune artiste* (Paris, Louvre), and finally “Fragao” in *Portrait d’une jeune femme en costume espagnol dit aussi La Cantatrice* (Private Collection) (pp. 132-138). Signatures written in capital letters suggested imperial Rome, a conceit exploited by Jacques-Louis David to align himself with glory in *La Mort de Marat*, 1791 (Brussels, Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium). Hubert Robert also inserts his name in capital letters in Latinized inscriptions placed on tombs in the Italian countryside, such as *Les Bergers d’Arcadie*, 1789 (Valence, Musée de Valence, art et archéologie). His signature, cleverly implanted on the tomb face, prompted the eighteenth-century viewer to contemplate a new concept of future time in which Robert had died and beholders would look at this representation with the same wonder as the gesticulating Italian peasants in the composition, paradoxically apprehending the presence and the absence of the painter simultaneously (p. 145).

The chapter on women artists is outstanding. In eighteenth-century France, women lived in a state of juridical minority, subject to husbands and fathers, complicating the assertions of authorship, authenticity and identity so boldly communicated by the signatures of Chardin, Fragonard and Robert. Their professional names were affected by the names of their husbands, and occasionally, their fathers. Élisabeth Vigée-Le Brun’s tribute to Rubens in her self-portrait known as *L’Autoportrait au chapeau de paille* exhibited in Salon of 1783 (Private Collection) is signed “Lse Le Brun/1782,” inverting her middle name, Louise, so as to position herself in the steps of her beloved father, Louis Vigée, an artist (pp. 193, 203). Adélaïde Labille-Guiard obtained a legal separation of property from her husband, Nicolas Guiard, which became an official divorce in 1792. Her professional identity, however, had been established as a married woman, and so the signature displayed on the back of the easel in the full-scale self-portrait with her two students exhibited in the Salon of 1785 is signed “Labille fine [*femme*] Guiard/1785 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art). Eighteenth-century women artists needed even more proof than their fractured signatures to claim authorship of their works, Guichard shows, since disparaging male critics often attributed any merit in their paintings to the hands of their male teachers, husbands, or lovers. This explains why women so often pictured themselves performing the role of painter in large format compositions intended for public display, like the works just described by Élisabeth Vigée-Le Brun and Adélaïde Labille-Guiard.

In the chapters devoted to synthesis, Guichard explores the historical factors shaping the eighteenth-century Paris art world, notably the broadening of circles of patronage and the growth of a robust market for easel paintings desired by collectors. It goes without saying that the rise of the signature was powered by the newly instituted public exhibitions staged annually by the Academy beginning in 1737. Later, the evolving institution of the museum would place

great value on the names of artists who created the works amassed for display in their collections. Guichard's last chapter covers a range of topics, including signatures on identity papers and the assignat, and ending with trompe l'oeil paintings by Louis-Léopold Boilly, 1810-1815, reflecting on the fixation with mechanical reproduction these paintings demonstrate.

If the signature is effective, Guichard writes in her conclusion, it is because it is constructed by both the artist and the beholder as a sign indicative of a presence—a presence expressing a thought in the work (pp. 299-300). The painter's signature that stuck with me after reading this book is the one Marie-Guihelmine Benoist inscribed on her magnificent *Portrait de Madeleine*, 1800 (Paris, Louvre), a painting generating so much attention and admiration today.[2] In this uncommissioned portrait of a beautiful former slave from Guadeloupe encircled by fabrics colored to evoke the Revolutionary tricolor, the painter places her signature in tiny cursive letters in a very unusual location, hovering above the hand reclining on the lap of the Black model. Benoist has signed it “Laville Laroulx f. [femme] Benoist.” Guichard points out the color of the paint used by painter to sign her name is the same color used to render the skin of the model, speculating that in the artist's name, “il y a un peu de son modèle, femme, noire et ancienne esclave” (p. 214). The diminutive signature extends the length of the figure's bent finger, and is thus allotted to a compressed space requiring Benoist to deposit her maiden name “Laville Leroulx” above “Benoist,” her married name. As a result, we confront the sign of an identity submerged by layers of patronyms, its timid *moi* so small and faint that it reads as a presence on the verge of erasure, a parallel, Guichard reminds us, to the legal standing of women in France at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

NOTES

[1] Christian Michel, *The Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture: The Birth of the French School, 1648-1793*, trans. Chris Miller (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2018), pp. 131-134. On the impact of fashion on Chardin's genre subjects in the 1730s, see Paula Radisich, *Pastiche, Fashion, and Galanterie in Chardin's Genre Subjects: Looking Smart* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2014).

[2] Called *Portrait de Madeleine* most recently in the exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris: see Pap Ndiaye and Louise Madinier, *Le modèle noir de Géricault à Matisse: La chronologie*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2019), p. 15. Also see Anne Lafont, *L'Art et la race. L'Africain (tout) contre l'oeil des Lumières* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2019), p. 333.

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