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Susanna Caviglia, *History, Painting, and the Seriousness of Pleasure in the Age of Louis XV*. Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment. Liverpool: Voltaire Foundation in association with Liverpool University Press, 2020. xxii + 281 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781789620399.

Review by Elizabeth Mansfield, Penn State University.

Susanna Caviglia's excellent new book delivers a persuasive reassessment of history painting during the reign of Louis XV, a period closely associated with the rococo. Yet, as evocative a term as it is, "rococo" is invoked sparingly across the six chapters that comprise this study. This rhetorical abstemiousness is undoubtedly deliberate, serving to distance the author's account of eighteenth-century French art from facile associations that have barnacled themselves to the term. "In general, until recently the term 'rococo' has been synonymous with hedonism, preciosity, love, and femininity and defined as an escapist aesthetic" (p. 4). Art historians, Caviglia suggests, have allowed the stereotypes to persist through a kind of benign neglect: scholarship on eighteenth-century French history painting tends to focus on the latter half of the century, especially the Revolutionary period.<sup>[1]</sup> It is in relation to this historiography that Caviglia positions her book as "the first critical examination of rococo history painting on its own terms that avoids a reductive definition of this art as either the foil or the precursor to...the neoclassical" (p. 5).

Along with distancing herself from the vexed historiography of the rococo, there is another advantage for Caviglia in minimizing her reliance on the term. Stylistic designations like rococo tend to imply that the history of art can be tidily classified into discrete phases. And this is precisely the misapprehension that Caviglia seeks to correct. The main argument of the book is that arts production under Louis XV is a continuation of, rather than a break with, the aesthetic program of his predecessor, Louis XIV. The rococo has long been cast as a reactionary movement against the visual arts campaign overseen by Louis XIV's *premier peintre*, Charles Le Brun. On this point Caviglia is unequivocal: the aesthetic project undertaken by artists like François Boucher and such contemporaries as Charles-Joseph Natoire and Carle Vanloo "was not...a reaction against the...classicism of the *grand siècle*" nor "an inversion of traditional artistic values" (p. 14). What Caviglia instead proposes is that works by these artists—in other words, what is typically treated separately by art historians as the rococo—be understood as a later phase of the *grand genre* promulgated in the final quarter of the seventeenth century by Louis XIV via the immersive aesthetic experience deployed at Versailles.

Inattentiveness to the political exigencies affecting arts production when Louis XV began to govern in 1723 has contributed to misunderstandings of the rococo.[2] Caviglia rightly insists on locating the distinctive visual character of the art of this period in its historical context. The young king sought to distance himself--and France's economic and political policies--from the conduct of his great-grandfather, whose approach to statecraft relied heavily on making war. Now, it was hoped, France's security and expansion would be pursued through strategic diplomacy, and economic growth would be spurred by a concomitant stabilization of labor and market conditions. And just as the *grand genre* served Louis XIV's military campaigns, so, too, would it promote the more pacific policies of his successor. As Caviglia shows, the continuation of the essential character of the *grand genre* under Louis XV is readily apparent. Allegories of the monarch based in classical myth persist, as do baroque forms and the unapologetic display of material splendor. It's just that martial iconography has been exchanged for allegories of "well-being, progress, and peace," and the percussive palette of the baroque has been softened into pizzicato pastels (p. 8).

Caviglia's alertness to the historical milieu in which the *grand genre* "turned away from a preoccupation with heroism or military victories and instead focused on expressing the possibility of a peaceful present" is matched by her attention to the conditions shaping the careers of artists associated with the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture (1648-1793), especially the intimately corporate nature of their lives (pp. 17-18). Painters affiliated with the Académie Royale studied and sometimes lived together as boys and young men; they competed with each other first as students and later as rivals for major commissions; as full *académiciens*, they lived as neighbors in the Louvre and served together on committees, on prize juries, and in various administrative posts. Given these circumstances, an attempt to explore the continuation of the *grand genre* via the career of a sole, exemplary artist--as is often the case in art history, where the single-artist monograph remains a disciplinary standard--would likely flatten the texture of this interesting history. Caviglia avoids this potential pitfall and instead frames her study in relation to a generational cohort.[3]

Key for Caviglia's history of the persistence of the *grand genre* from the reign of Louis XIV to that of his successor is the collective impact of the "Generation of 1700." First identified by art historian Pierre Rosenberg, the Generation of 1700 refers to a group of academicians who were born in or close to that year, received similar training, and went on to exert significant influence on the arts via official acclaim, popular success, and administrative posts. The group includes such leading lights as Boucher, Natoire, and Vanloo, as well as artists similarly prominent in their day like Pierre Subleyras and Pierre-Charles Trémolières (pp. 12-13). Trained in the academic system devised largely by Le Brun, these artists were fluent in the *grand genre*. They were also among those responsible for articulating a visual rhetoric that accorded with the ambitions and sensibilities of Louis XV--and, by extension, his court and government. To adjust the *grand genre* in accord with these conditions, Caviglia explains, artists of the Generation of 1700 not only applied a softer palette and more delicate ornamentation but also adopted an aesthetic of repose.

Far from a bellicose--and potentially reckless--man of action, Louis XV fashioned himself as a man of thought and self-reflection. This resonated with an ambient cultural philosophy that celebrated the self-possessed *homme vertueux*. Hence the popularity of subjects like Mucius Scaevola and the Contenance of Scipio for paintings and tapestries intended for the royal residences. But happiness, peace, contentment, even *galanterie*--these attributes of Louis *le bien*

*aimé*—did not lend themselves to declamatory, multifigure narrative scenes; instead, these qualities could be represented more effectively via single figures or small groups engaged in absorptive activities. Caviglia turns to contemporary sources to understand how happiness was understood as a mental and physical state. “Numerous texts celebrate happiness as a state of repose, a delicious immobility of the soul” (p. 65). Pleasure was similarly understood as a condition of equilibrium or a mastery of the passions. “The state of *bonheur* embodied in the depicted figures thus overlaps with the *plaisir* of the viewer standing in front of them” (p. 66). Thus, rather than appealing to episodes from the life of Alexander the Great or narrative scenes from Greek mythology, the new *grand genre* dispensed with overt storytelling in favor of bodies made eloquent through evocative attributes and bravura technical effects. “The aesthetic embodied in the new grand genre is conceived essentially as the staging of loving beings resting in agreeable, timeless contexts” (p. 81). In this explanation of the proliferation of isolated biblical and mythological figures, Caviglia explicitly recalls Norman Bryson’s distinction between discursive and figural practices, the former evoking meaning through recourse to external, textual sources and the latter locating meaning within representation itself. [4] Caviglia ascribes a sociohistorical rationale for the eighteenth-century turn to figural practice, linking it to the need for a visual mode that valorized *bonheur* in part by suspending the viewer in a state of self-possessed *plaisir*. In this way, following Caviglia’s argument, the proliferation of recumbent, passive, even eroticized nudes in French academic art in the first decades of Louis XV’s reign are part of the recalibration of the *grand genre*—not the symptoms of a reactionary, decadent new style. This “shift from drama to peaceful stasis” not only thematizes the stated policies of Louis XV but facilitates the deportment appropriate for new modes of aristocratic decorum (p. 109).

Successful depictions of bodily repose demanded a high degree of anatomic knowledge and technical virtuosity. In these the Generation of 1700 was particularly adept. As it happened, acquisition of precisely this combination of understanding and skill was a chief aim of the life-drawing exercise known as the *académie*. Life classes where nude models—just male models in the seventeenth century, though female models appeared in the 1720s and were in regular use by the 1750s—were often posed by instructors in such a way as to be suggestive of a particular activity (e.g., *en garde*, recumbent) or character type (e.g., warrior, martyr) or physical state (e.g., tense, enervated). Given the length of time the model would pose (hours at a time, with regular breaks), positions that could be endured for long stretches with the aid of cushions, stools, or ropes were the norm. Understood in the context of the recalibration of the *grand genre* in support of Louis XV’s social and cultural agenda, the “academy figure, originally conceived as a study, for teaching purposes or in preparation for a narrative work of art, also became the locus for reflection on a psychological state of being” (p. 161). Artists of the Generation of 1700 received an especially rigorous training in *académies*, according to Caviglia, who also attributes to these artists a predilection for deemphasizing or obscuring entirely the face of the model in order to shift all psychological or even latent narrative content to the body. Finally, the “representation of figures from the back was the culmination of a shift toward a conception of the human body as the principal locus of emotional and artistic expression” (p. 156). Caviglia points to several examples of this trend dating to the first half of the eighteenth century. Regardless of the abundance of examples—and Caviglia’s easy command of the repertoire allows her to marshal ample visual evidence in support of her argument throughout the book—“contemporary art historians have thus far dated [this trend] to the second half of the eighteenth century and associated especially with [Jacques-Louis] David” (p. 156).

Along with reinterpreting the significance of the experimental *académies* pursued so avidly by the Generation of 1700, Caviglia proposes a reconsideration of the long-standing practice by artists of regularly reusing figures and other motifs. Painters might repeat several times over the course of a career a particular figure study made while they were students, or they might recycle an especially felicitous motif in multiple works. Just as common in academic practice was the undisguised borrowing of figures or passages from the Old Masters or even from contemporaries. This engagement with repetition takes on a particular relevance to the *grand genre*, according to Caviglia, who ascribes to the Generation of 1700 a more energetic pursuit of this strategy. In the hands of artists like Boucher and Trémolières, the practice became “a new way of composing paintings on the basis of isolated figures”—an extension of the suppression of narrative that helped to define the new *grand genre* (p. 216). But the strategy lost its appeal: “By mid-century, the absence of physical, gestural, or psychological connections among the figures had become the object of criticism and was seen as contradicting the narrative principles and proprieties of history painting” (p. 217).

By Caviglia’s account, rococo’s fall from favor was related to a growing dissatisfaction with Louis XV and his policies. This started in the mid-century when “some critics called for a return to the heroic, sublime *grand genre* of the seventeenth century”—a change in taste that coincided with a “shift in the king’s popularity following diplomatic disappointments, military reversals, and Jansenist controversy” (p. 84). Criticisms of the rococo mounted. Yet, even with the accession of Louis XVI in 1774 and a worsening economic and political situation, the *grand genre* endured. In much the same way that the Generation of 1700 reinvented the *grand genre*, the students of painter Joseph-Marie Vien recast the official visual language of France for a new regime. This time, however, it was not in the service of an individual monarch’s agenda but to give visual form to more abstract ideals: “The aesthetics of the generation of 1700 sowed the seeds for its reappropriation by neoclassical painting in the image of a newly triumphant body. Embedded within this new aesthetic, happiness would become as important as liberty in the new egalitarian politics of republican revolutions, where it remained a very serious foundational concept” (p. 250). Thus tempered, the *grand genre* became the aesthetic basis for Davidian neoclassicism and the striking nudes—often presented in isolation or with one other figure—painted by artists like Anne-Louis Girodet, François Gérard, and Pierre Guérin in the decade after Thermidor. Whether the *grand genre* survived the Napoleonic period Caviglia doesn’t say. It remains to be seen whether Caviglia herself will take up this thread and carry her research into the nineteenth century. What is certain is that, with *History, Painting, and the Seriousness of Pleasure in the Age of Louis XV*, Caviglia has cleared a way toward a more complete understanding of the relationship between art and politics in France during the long eighteenth century.

## NOTES

[1] Caviglia notes the scholarship of Mary Sheriff, Melissa Hyde, and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth as important exceptions to this tendency. Caviglia acknowledges that her book “builds on this scholarship” (p. 6).

[2] Caviglia dates the development of Louis XV’s aesthetic campaign to the start of his sole rule at the end of the Regency, which lasted from 1715 to 1723.

[3] This comment is in no way meant to detract from the important contributions to scholarship that have been and continue to be made via monographic studies and *catalogues raisonnés*. Indeed,

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exemplary of the kind of monographic treatment that offers insights into both the career of a single artist and the wider context is Caviglia's catalogue raisonné, *Charles-Joseph Natoire, 1700-1777* (Paris: ARTHENA, 2012). The book under discussion here is quite a different project and benefits from the more holistic approach Caviglia applies to it.

[4] Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

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