

The Vexations of French Taste

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During his time as the president of France, Emmanuel Macron has often deployed the term “French taste” when attempting to articulate the distinctive role of his country in the world. Addressing farmers in Auvergne in 2018, for example, he suggested that French taste protected the nation’s agriculture against globalization: “French agriculture could have, on multiple occasions, been swept away by global competition, but it has talent and tenacity. It resisted thanks to the will of the farmers [...] and because there was, if I may say, French taste.”¹ He went on to define this taste in terms of the French attachment to “quality products,” ensuring that the country upheld “standards of entire sectors” even as global markets moved toward mass production at low prices. A year later, during Chinese president Xi Jinping’s visit to France, Macron put a different spin on French taste, suggesting that it facilitated international cooperation and trade. “French taste can pair well with Chinese taste,” he declared as Xi sampled a variety of French beef and wine.² These two statements, one directed at French farmers and the other toward international trading partners, capture some of the tensions that exist within the contemporary understanding of French taste. On the one hand, it can refer to a set of internal values that notionally unify French people against outside threats. On the other hand, it can describe an exportable quality that is assimilable with other cultures and appreciated by a global elite. In balancing these competing conceptions of French taste, Macron has confronted one of the more vexing challenges of his presidency, attempting to reconcile the demands of resurgent nationalism with a commitment to cosmopolitan universalism.

The challenge that Macron faces here has become particularly acute in recent years, but the contributions to this special issue of *H-France Salon* make clear that it has a long history. The polarities of patriotic exceptionalism and international hybridization have coexisted within the concept of French taste from its origins in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Natacha Coquery’s opening essay reveals the degree to which French merchants and artisans during this period developed a rhetoric of French superiority in fashion and luxury production even as they integrated foreign production techniques and materials into their products. “What the trade literature reveals,” she observes, “is that the famous ‘French taste,’ an expression of national genius for those that lauded it, was in fact enriched by multiple foreign influences.” The contemporary reverberations of these ideas become evident in Grace Allen’s concluding essay,

¹ “Alors l’agriculture française aurait pu, à plusieurs reprises, être balayée par cette compétition mondiale mais elle a du talent, de la ténacité. Elle a résisté parce qu’il y a eu la volonté des paysans [...] et parce qu’il y a eu, si je puis dire, le goût français.” Macron, “Discours des vœux à l’agriculture.”

² “Le goût français peut bien se marier avec le goût chinois.” Quoted in Bourmaud, “Emmanuel Macron joue les maîtres queux pour Xi Jinping.”

which analyzes how the French trade association known as the Comité Colbert has, since the 1980s, promoted what the group describes as a distinctly French “art de vivre” while developing a strategy of cultural “cross-fertilization” (*métissage*) to allow French brands to penetrate foreign markets. Allen demonstrates how such language adapts a tradition of French chauvinism to twenty-first-century expectations of inclusivity, presenting France “not as a civilizer, but as a steward” of craft traditions across the globe.

In analyzing the frequently contradictory construction of French taste, the authors in this *Salon* share an implicit set of methodological principles. The six contributors largely eschew canonical works of French aesthetic theory. They make scant references to Jean-Baptiste Dubos, Charles Batteaux, and other writers who are often treated as foundational to the philosophy of taste and beauty in France. Instead, their essays foreground the construction of taste in practice, whether through advertising campaigns or the design of everyday objects. The authors treat fine art as a porous category that has no monopoly over the definition of taste. Shana Cooperstein thus brings the eye of an art historian to bear on the role of children’s toys in nineteenth-century aesthetic education, showing how dolls and puppets became tools for asserting French cultural hegemony. In Ben Poole’s essay, aesthetic and gustatory conceptions of taste intersect in French gastronomy. Through the evolution of cuisine, Poole shows how definitions of French taste have variously weighted cosmopolitanism and regional specificity in response to the geopolitical shifts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

By approaching taste through the sociopolitical contexts in which it operates, the authors in this issue largely follow Pierre Bourdieu’s now orthodox view that taste serves as an instrument of power. But where Bourdieu primarily analyzed taste as a mode of class differentiation, the contributors to this *Salon* integrate a concern for class relations with an attentiveness to national identity. Haute couture may signal upper-class prestige, but as Sophie Kurkdjian’s essay demonstrates, it has also provided a forum for competing visions of France’s place in the world. Led by foreign-born designers and shaped by immigrant workers, the major Parisian fashion houses of the late nineteenth century elicited both xenophobic screeds and paeans to French universalism. Similarly, Linda Stratford shows how nationalist and universalist visions of French culture collided in the reception of abstract painting in France in the 1940s and 1950s. Proponents of natively French forms of abstraction claimed to find precedents in medieval traditions that they associated with France’s rural past, which they pitted against the allegedly foreign abstraction of urban modernity.

In such cases, the role of taste in class distinction is inextricable from its function in national mythology. Bourdieu himself came to recognize the intersection of national and class identities in his late lectures on state formation. Revisiting one of his classic essays on the symbolic maintenance of social hierarchies, he observed “I was not aware that I was writing an article on the state; I thought I was writing an article on symbolic power.”³ Cultural standards, he had come to believe, could simultaneously maintain social hierarchies within a nation while producing a sense of national cohesion against an outside world. It is a paradox that makes clear the contradictions behind Macron’s call, at the height of the Yellow Vest protests, for French people

³ Bourdieu, *On the State*, 161.

“to bring the nation into agreement with itself about its deep identity.”⁴ If the essays in this issue suggest a common lesson, it is that attempts to define a nation’s “deep identity” can produce agreement and discord in equal measure.

About the author: Oliver Wunsch teaches art history at Boston College. He is the author of *A Delicate Matter: Art, Fragility, and Consumption in Eighteenth-Century France* (Penn State University Press, 2024).

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⁴ “Je veux aussi que nous mettions d’accord la Nation avec elle-même sur ce qu’est son identité profonde.” Macron, “Adresse du Président de la République.”