

Melissa Lee Hyde and Katie Scott, eds., *Rococo Echo: Art, History and Historiography from Cochin to Coppola*. (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, Oxford Studies in the Enlightenment, 2014) Print 398 pp., £65.00, ISBN: 9780729411158.



Review

Recent scholarship has successfully defended eighteenth-century Rococo art and visual culture as a legitimate style reflecting the political, social and cultural context in which fine art works and material objects were produced and consumed. In 2008, the landmark exhibition *Rococo: The Continuing Curve, 1730–2008* held at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York confirmed the enduring legacy and relevance of the style by bringing together a diverse group of historical and contemporary art works, objects and artefacts. Following the exhibition, a conference session held in 2010 by the College Art Association in New York culminated in the publication of this fine collection of sixteen essays. These essays are flanked by the critically insightful foreword and afterword penned by editors Melissa Lee Hyde and Katie Scott, who have each contributed to pivotal revisions of the Rococo period itself.

Katie Scott asserts that the collection does not aim at comprehensiveness, and yet it is a substantial text, a weighty contribution to the field offering exciting new approaches to both historical accounts of the Rococo and its lasting influence throughout the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. Spanning a broad range of media in both the fine and decorative arts, commercial art, film, installation, criticism and fashion photography, some of the essays here also look beyond the centres of Europe. Collectively, these essays address both historical and current manifestations of Rococo through the lens of national and personal identity, cultural politics, post-colonialism, sexuality and gender. Taking the formal qualities of the style's characteristic sensuality and organic, sinuous line as metaphor, the essays in this volume challenge traditional definitions and approach the Rococo not simply as a term describing a particular aesthetic, but as Melissa Hyde affirms, as 'a cultural mode of being' (p. 338).

Satish Padiyar's description of Jean-Honoré Fragonard as a 'later performer of the Rococo' (p. 215) considers the way in which Rococo painting persisted alongside the triumphant rise of Neoclassicism and revolutionary politics in contradiction to

conventional accounts describing a crisp, linear trajectory from one style to the next. Painting on the very cusp of Revolution, Fragonard perpetuated the Rococo aesthetic well beyond its hey-day mid-century and embodied a transitory moment in which time and history were out of joint. For Padiyar, Fragonard's artistic practice disrupts accounts of opposing styles and ideals, exemplifying the way in which Rococo moves outside of rigid boundaries and lives on well beyond prescribed expiry dates.

Looking to the nineteenth century, Michael Yonan offers a fresh approach to appraisals of the Rococo by turning to Germany and examples of less familiar artists and writers. With reference to artists including Carl Pier and critics including Johann Friedrich Reiffenstein, Yonan explains how German opposition to the French Rococo reflected ideals of national identity and concerns that the French influence would have a detrimental impact on German culture and the morality of the populace. In her assessment of English carver Thomas Johnson, Brigid von Preussen similarly describes the way in which the French style was considered a capricious influence that was nonetheless offset by the appropriation of foreign designs and products by local craftsmen, designers and artists in order to avoid importation and protect authentic 'Britishness'.

The relationship between Britain and France also informs Elizabeth Mansfield's intriguing account of nineteenth-century scholar Emilia Dilke, whose fascination for eighteenth-century French visual culture and Rococo in particular served her own interests in advocating for labour rights, trade unionism and the emancipation of women. The work of women artists features in Anne Higonnet's fascinating exploration of the image of the fan in French Impressionist painting. As an emblem of Rococo femininity, the motif of the fan evoked notions of the exotic as well as the historically remote culture of early eighteenth-century Europe. The fan as a delicate object also conjured associations with the flirtations of women and their seemingly light, inconsistent movements that were difficult to pin down — not unlike the playful ironies of Rococo and blurred notions of the past and present.

Moving into the twentieth century, Allison Unruh's essay on Andy Warhol's commercial art work illustrates the way in which playful subversion and homosexual desire is elaborated through his adaptation of feminine Rococo motifs during the 1950s. Similarly, Rebecca Arnold discusses the way in which contemporary director Sophia Coppola proposes a 'new Rococo' (p. 295) in her manipulation of fashion imagery and design throughout her films. Arnold argues

that visual references to beauty and decorative surfaces are used by artists and film makers including Coppola to facilitate an overarching exploration of time, memory, emotion and identity. It is in Arnold's closing remarks on Coppola's work that the eighteenth-century Rococo comes full circle as a contemporary style appealing to viewers initiated into covert meanings lying beneath pretty surfaces. She states that 'surface can be just as, if not more, meaningful in its sleights of hand, although the correct cultural capital is needed to explore its hidden depths' (p. 312).

Intended for a more specialised readership, *Rococo Echo* is an impressive and authoritative volume addressing the complex and various ways in which the eighteenth-century style persists as an alluring echo long after it was deemed redundant. In its more recent apparitions, the curvilinear nature of Rococo's formal and conceptual qualities continue to reflect its teasing, shifting ambiguity and gentle resistance of cultural and temporal constraints as each of these sophisticated essays amply demonstrate.

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