

## The art market before the French Revolution

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**Charlotte Guichard highlights the role of the *amateur d'art* in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century art market. Although he played a key role in the rise of French art in the last half century of the Ancien Régime, the *amateur* was strongly criticized for his aristocratic notion of artistic taste.**

Reviewed: Charlotte Guichard, *Les Amateurs d'art à Paris au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Champ Vallon, 2008. 391 p., 29 €.

To tour the 18<sup>th</sup>-century rooms of any gallery with decent French collections is to acquaint oneself with the figure of the *amateur*. Greuze's portrait of Claude-Henri Watelet (Louvre) which decorates the front cover of Charlotte Guichard's fine new book, *Les Amateurs d'art à Paris au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, is only a celebrated example of a genre that one could extend to include Greuze's La Live de Jully (Washington DC), Roslin's Blondel d'Azincourt (private collection) and Vincent's Pierre-Jacques Bergeret (Besançon) – all painted between the 1740s and the 1770s. Despite the great interest that the history of the eighteenth-century Parisian art world has attracted over recent decades, we have hitherto lacked a global analysis of this particular social and cultural type. Guichard's work fills this gap, and in so doing opens many fruitful channels of enquiry.

Guichard is particularly keen to resist a reductionist temptation to collapse the *amateur* into the trans-historical identity of the patron (or, on a related tack, of the collector). She offers a carefully-historicised account of a figure she wishes to view in its specificity

rather than as a mere epiphenomenon in the long histories of patronage and collection. Her study allows us to track the social identity, milieu and activities of the *amateur* from the middle decades of the eighteenth century through to the end of the Ancien Régime, to identify the ways in which he acted as a lubricant in the art world, and also to follow the cultural and increasingly political debates which such figures aroused.

The period under review saw an enormous boom in the commercialisation of French art. But *amateurs* were amphibious creatures, both of – yet not of – the art market. They might be economically active, positively cultivating the business of the arts; but they were not entrepreneurs in any narrowly economic sense. They collected; but they were not collectors driven by estimations of rising value. They bought and sold, but would have been horrified to think that such mercantile activity in any way defined their identity. They prided themselves on choosing and selecting according to the dictates of taste, not profit. Besides acting in the role of Maecenas, they might, and did, engage in artistic practice themselves; but their principal roles were mediation and facilitation. And if in general, like any aristocrat, they held mercantile values in revulsion, this was because they were indeed aristocrats – and rather plutocratic ones at that, drawn largely from financial, Robe and military elites. This meant that they had not only the money and leisure to cultivate their identity as amateurs, but also the political capital necessary to allow them to establish a niche within the institutional space of the arts under the aegis of the state.

Guichard's account starts in 1747, in fact, the year in which the Académie de peinture et de sculpture reconfigured the post of *amateur honoraire*, which had been established in 1663 and which had hitherto served as a means by which individuals from the social elite associated themselves with the Académie's activities. The comte de Caylus was a major player in this reformulation, and the role's principal theorist. In 1748, he pronounced a speech on "l'amateur". The "véritable amateur", he told the Académie, will be "*un homme que l'amour de vos arts et votre choix rendent amateur*" (p. 27). Caylus was also instrumental in closely associating the notion of the *amateur* with the Académie, and he was to prove a representative figure among the ranks of *amateurs* as they developed over the next decades. He set the template for others by attending the Académie's sessions assiduously, contributing speeches on aspects of art practice and values, besides publishing extensively. He supported public lectures in which *amateurs* theorised art as cultural practice, and sought to galvanise other *amateurs* by instituting the lives of artists as a genre in which they could excel. He

sponsored two Académie prizes – one in 1759 for expression, the other in 1764 for anatomical poses. He also played a major role in the Salon, commissioning much new work. Finally, he sought to develop active relationships of friendly sociability with artists, thus providing a sense of common purpose and vision. In many ways, then, the world of the amateur held a clear affinity with the kind of sociability on offer within Parisian salons, as described in Antoine Lilti's recent book, *Le Monde des salons: sociabilité et mondanité au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Fayard, 2005), where aristocratic mondains rubbed shoulders with *philosophes*, writers, and intellectuals of all descriptions. As with the literary salons, moreover, there was a sense that such sociability worked as a kind of polishing mechanism and a civilising agency which distinguished the French nation and from which the whole of humanity would in time profit.

Down to the end of the Ancien Régime, the achievements of *amateurs* would be considerable, and Guichard is excellent in highlighting their multiform activities: publishing inventories of private collections and sale catalogues, revalorising artist biography, inflecting taste (notably towards a more favourable view of French painting, and also to a reassessment of Antiquity which would influence the emergence of neo-classicism), and developing new social practices of artistic consumption and new forms of visual education (notably through visits to collection housed in private residences redesigned for tasteful display or else through re-popularising the Grand Tour itinerary down to Rome). Furthermore, by benignly associating the lustre of their names with the Académie de peinture, by supporting its institutional claims (notably vis-à-vis the rivalrous painters's corporation, the Académie de Saint-Luc), and by personally engaging in art practice on the same level as the artists they sponsored, they gave the world of Parisian art unlooked for credit and éclat.

Yet almost from the start, the *amateurs* as Caylus defined them found the cultural identity they were constructing under attack on the public sphere in general, and more particularly from the vantage-point of the art critic. Indeed, the very year – 1747 – in which Caylus reformulated the Académie's *amateurs honoraires* also saw the publication of La Font de Saint-Yenne's *Réflexions sur quelques causes de l'état présent de la peinture*, which is generally viewed as establishing the cultural role of the art critic, and speaking in the interests of the general public. Caylus and his fellow amateurs were certainly not antagonistic to the public. They frequently put their collections on display for interested members of the general public as well as to artists (Caylus's, for example, were remarkable for their archaeological interest as well as for their artistic range). Their publications targeted a similar audience. To

some degree, they helped construct and shape the art public, and indeed of the independent critic of artwork. Yet by refusing all except those institutionally associated the identity of *amateur*, they helped push art critics and other writers on the public sphere towards a more radical stance.

From around 1765 onwards, Guichard argues, the commercialisation of art had reached such a pitch that the identity of the *amateur* as Caylus had conceived it was being increasingly delegitimised on the public sphere. Diderot attacked “*la race maudite [...] des amateurs*” (1767), and the Encyclopédistes were no less vehement. The taste vaunted by the *amateur*'s was assailed as quintessentially aristocratic and therefore antagonistic to more authentic public values. The association of *amateurs* with the state now seemed a form of un-civic parasitism. Satirised in public polemics as shortsighted (they often were represented with an outsize magnifying glass), they were viewed as despots who strove to enslave artists and corrupt civic values rather than as well-meaning individuals zealous to improve national taste and to expand the constituency which art served. Such a critique, carried forward even more vehemently under the Revolution, would put paid to the very idea of the *amateur* after 1789 – though the notion of taste as a distinguishing mark of French art and art-criticism had, as Guichard suggests, a much longer history.

As the final chapters of Guichard's book show, the *amateur* was thus a significant figure negatively as well as positively. He played a key role in the rise of French art in the last half century of the Ancien Régime, opening it to new social practices and fabricating new cultural values. But he also provided a negative stereotype of fundamental importance in the construction of the socially and politically engaged artist. *Les Amateurs d'art*, widely researched, densely argued, lucidly written, is thus not only an exemplary study in social and economic history; in addition it also which also makes a significant contribution to the broader cultural politics of pre-Revolutionary France.

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