

Antoine Maës: La laiterie de Marie-Antoinette à Rambouillet

This richly illustrated book, published to coincide with two exhibitions dedicated to the painter Hubert Robert (1733-1808) held at the Louvre (Paris) and the National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.) in 2016, documents Robert's fundamental role in the conception, creation, and decoration of the queen's dairy at Rambouillet. [1] Although accredited with designing many picturesque garden sites in Paris, the archival record is often lacking, therefore Maës' meticulous narrative provides invaluable insights to Robert's working methods. [2] Nonetheless, it is important to note two earlier studies by Johannes Langner and Meredith Martin. Both authors clearly established the dairy as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the epitome of French pastoral architecture at the end of the *ancien regime*. [3] Maës acknowledges this previous scholarship, as well as the pioneering work by Selma Schwartz, whose studies of the porcelain service designed for the tasting of cream and cheeses remains the seminal work. [4] However, Maës' goal is not to offer new interpretations of the project. He rather champions Hubert Robert's role at Rambouillet at each stage of the design process.

The book divides into eight chronological chapters and includes very useful appendices and bibliographies charting the evolution of the building from its inception in 1785 until its completion in 1787-88. The first section outlines the history of Rambouillet prior to Louis XVI's purchase of the château and extensive hunting grounds in 1783. Briefly evoking the fashion for dairies in this period, the discussion of the construction of the building focuses on Robert's creative role, assisted by mason entrepreneur Jacques Jean Thevenin (1732-1813). Given Maës' desire to reconstruct the archival record, he publishes two of Thevenin's early drawings, yet maintains that the ultimate form of the dairy - a dome with an oculus - was inspired by Robert's drawings after Roman architectural ruins. The section dedicated to Pierre Julien (1731-1804) documents the sculptor's contribution to the project: the free standing sculpture of Amalthea and her goat placed in front of a *rocher-grotto* under the oculus, six decorative marble medallions depicting themes of milking and making butter so central to the iconography of the dairy, and two marble friezes that recount the Amalthea myth. Clearly, Julien collaborated with Robert, and Maës convincingly argues that Julien's works were not only of exceptional artistic quality but ideally suited for the program.

Maës forcefully asserts Robert's role as the designer of the 'Etruscan style' for the mahogany tables, chairs and stools arguing that Robert submitted now lost drawings to the master *menuisier* Georges Jacob (1739-1814). Jacob's career is well known, yet Maës' argument that collaboration between Robert and the versatile furniture maker produced "veritable prototypes" for Jacob's later career is less persuasive (44). While the Rambouillet commission was an unequalled opportunity to work for the powerful D'Angiviller and alongside Robert, it is useful to keep in mind that Jacob's exceptional craftsmanship was established over twenty years prior to his participation at Rambouillet.

With the same exacting attention to archival analysis, Maës clarifies and updates Schwartz's study of the porcelain service for Rambouillet, providing lists, drawings, and reproductions. Maës clearly traces how D'Angiviller joined his position as the director of the Sèvres manufactory to his position as governor of Rambouillet so that he could encourage French industry, hoping to rival Josiah Wedgwood's commercial success in England. Further, D'Angiviller, who had acquired over five hundred vases from Dominique Vivant Denon's tours of Naples and Sicily for the Louvre, placed this rare collection of antique vases at Sèvres in order to inspire the artists at the Sèvres manufactory. D'Angiviller then appointed Jean Jacques Lagrenée (1739-1821) to execute new pieces in what he promoted as the fashionable 'Etruscan style'. D'Angiviller stipulated that Robert would oversee the selection of vases for Rambouillet, which is likely, but it was Lagrenée, and the sculptor Louis-Simon Boizot (1743-1809), who was director of the sculpture at Sèvres, who conceived and executed the sixty five-piece-service.

In the short chapter entitled *Un Dialogue entre les Arts*, Maës argues that when D'Angiviller charged Robert with the oversight of the dairy, he hoped to create a homogenous iconography that would please the queen. In order to neutralize the apocryphal account of the queen's disdain for the project, noting that she visited her namesake dairy just once, when it was revealed to her on June 26, 1787, Maës publishes a lengthy and laudatory description of the

building from the royalist *Almanach de Versailles* (1788). At this point in the book, Maës' exhaustive archival scholarship seems to leave him at a loss for words: how could the queen seemingly spurn this avant-garde project so clearly designed to support French industry? In fact, Meredith Martin's analysis of the dairy clearly elucidated that despite the dedication of the building to the queen, Marie-Antoinette neither participated nor was privy to the design of the dairy. Martin has convincingly argued that the dairy represented "a male fantasy of regenerated monarchy and domesticated femininity in which the queen had no place" (219). D'Angiviller clearly hoped that the Rambouillet dairy would rejuvenate monarchical imagery at a time of increasing political crisis; however, as Martin suggested, the queen's body was cast out, leaving D'Angiviller with a building dedicated to regeneration, but without the queen, effectively undermining his own initiative. Martin's sensitive iconological reading offers a feminist interpretation that addresses the social and political complexities of the project, subjects that Maës has chosen to marginalize by focusing almost exclusively on the archival record.

In the final chapter, Maës tracks the vicissitudes of the dairy after the collapse of the monarchy, thereby providing a succinct overview that will certainly interest scholars of the Revolutionary decade. Maës recounts that Joséphine Bonaparte appropriated Julien's sculptures and marble reliefs for Malmaison. Joséphine also claimed pieces from the Rambouillet porcelain service for her dairy. Yet, as Selma Schwartz has pointed out, it is difficult to attribute which works from Rambouillet were listed in the inventory after Joséphine's death in 1814-15. Approximately twenty pieces have survived to this day in public collections.

Maës' thoughtful analysis and recuperation of the archival record greatly enhances our knowledge of the dairy and promotes a greater appreciation of the intersections of garden design with painting, sculpture, architecture and porcelain. Certainly, thanks to this study, we better appreciate the role of Hubert Robert as a garden designer: nonetheless, an overview of the rich historiography of this period would have enhanced our appreciation not only of the creation but also of the reception of this remarkable monument.

Notes:

[1] *Hubert Robert (1733-1808). Un Peintre Visionnaire*, Paris, Musée du Louvre, 8 Mars - 30 Mai, 2016, *Hubert Robert*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., June 26 - October 2, 2016. Maës contributed to the French catalogue. Also see Catherine Voirot's entry on "Jardins" in the French catalogue which should be consulted in tandem with the detailed chronology included as an appendix, 346-349, 445-551.

[2] Several authors have addressed Robert's career as a garden designer: Jean de Cayeux: *Hubert Robert et les Jardins*, Paris 1987; Susan B. Taylor: *Ut Pictura Horti: Hubert Robert and the Bains d'Apollon at Versailles*, doctoral thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1990; Sarah Catala / Gabriel Wick: *Hubert Robert, la fabrique des jardins*, Paris 2017. D'Angiviller's privileged relationship with Robert began in 1778 when the painter was first commissioned to work at the *Bains d'Apollon* at Versailles. Robert did not officially receive his title at *Dessinateur des Jardins du Roi* until 1784 when working at Rambouillet, a document brought to light by Antoine Maës and noted in the French exhibition catalogue. Robert's activity as a garden designer was however acknowledged in royal registers and the press as early as 1778.

[3] Johannes Langner: *Architecture pastorale sous Louis XVI*, in: *Art de France 3* (1963), 170-186; Meredith S. Martin: *Dairy Queens: The Politics of Pastoral architecture from Catherine De Medici to Marie-Antoinette*, Cambridge, MA / London 2011, especially Chapter 5, 214-258.

[4] Selma Schwartz: *Un 'air d'antiquité'. Le Service de Sèvres réalisé pour la laiterie de Marie-Antoinette at Rambouillet*, in: *Versalia 10* (2007), 154-181.

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