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Cosmopolitan Moments

ABSTRACT

The history of visual material is continually renewed by scholars from other disciplines working in what were once considered to be the margins of art history. Historians of dress, gardens, travel and diplomacy bring into focus the impact of visual experiences that moved Europeans beyond the traditions of their local cultures. In this special issue, four emerging scholars take up 'cosmopolitan moments' of cultural exchange as seen in the visual evidence of history. The papers were initially presented as part of an interdisciplinary postgraduate workshop and symposium on Enlightenment Cosmopolitanisms, convened by the Sydney Intellectual History Network at the University of Sydney in 2014.

Introduction

The character of practiced cosmopolitanism during the Enlightenment often appears to amount to little more than an extension of early modern courtly internationalism infused with a new language of ideas. Further exploration of this concept reveals the desire on the part of Enlightenment cosmopolites to open borders in the name of economic, political, intellectual and artistic progress. What were the opportunities through which border crossings became fixed in the minds of participants and observers? How were such opportunities seized in relation to the constructed biographies of individuals? What role did art, in its various forms, play in visualizing the possibilities of a cosmopolitan lifestyle? Finally, in what ways did people lay claim to membership in a cosmopolitan community through practices of collecting and dress? In response to these questions, the four essays in this issue delve into cosmopolitan moments, framed as lived experiences in which instances of cultural exchange were embodied in the visual – collected art objects displayed with cosmopolitan taste, botanical gifts planted with cosmopolitan knowledge, and the cosmopolitan performances of dress and diplomacy.

To preface the work that these essays are doing in establishing moments when the cosmopolitan ideals of the Enlightenment became inflected in the daily lives and interests of individuals, some more elite and intellectual than others, it is useful to distinguish the social and aesthetic aspects of cosmopolitan thought from the more

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philosophical and political. Here I am careful to use 'cosmopolitan' rather than 'cosmopolitanism'. The '-ism' is indicative of a philosophical and political movement that involved theoretical development at the hands of thinking men in the last decades of the eighteenth century. So while a cosmopolitan ideal was developing in the writings of Enlightenment philosophers and philosophes, men like Diderot, Kant, Hume and Voltaire, among many others,[1] in this issue we are more interested in the forms and habits of cosmopolitan expression that appeared outside of such thoughtful circles. While the aspiration to be a 'citizen of the world' is most often explored in relation to Enlightenment thought, there has been attention given, by Margaret Jacob, for example, to the "settings and situations" in which cosmopolitan behavior was visible and supported an ideal of personal transformation.[2] In this respect, border crossings were a state of mind. The self was unbounded from the local ties of family, religion and nation, and became part of an international community of like-minded people. Within the history of art, this can be understood as the formation of cosmopolitan taste, something that Mark Cheetham has explored in connection with art writing in England during the eighteenth century. Looking at the writings of Jonathan Richardson and William Hogarth, Cheetham homes in on the cosmopolitan inflections of their descriptions of visual experience by which aesthetic judgement relied upon universal understanding and, in Hogarth's words, the ability to 'see with our own eyes'.[3] What distinguishes cosmopolitan taste of the Enlightenment from the courtly taste of the early modern Europe is this very empirical basis of judgment.[4] Visualising the performance of cosmopolitan taste, knowledge and experience was an important way by which individuals laid claim to their own membership in a wider community of learned people, beyond their local networks and societies.

Garritt Van Dyk's essay tells the story of the embassy of Soliman Aga to the court of Louis XIV in 1669. An early moment of cross-cultural exchange between the French and the Ottomans, the diplomatic contact between Eastern and Western courts was vividly performed through the language of dress. Yet it was with efforts to display cosmopolitan knowledge of different cultures that decisions about dress and diplomacy were made by the French court. In particular, Louis XIV's wearing diamonds in his reception of a diplomatic representative of the Ottoman Empire reflected the monarch's awareness of how diamonds were an appurtenance of power and rarity, not only in Europe, but also much valued in the East.

Emma Gleadhill continues with this theme of cosmopolitan performance. Looking at Lady Elizabeth Holland's collection of art and objects acquired on the Grand Tour,

[1] Schlereth, 1977 and Scrivener, 2007.
[2] Jacob, 2006, p. 122.
[3] Cheetham, 2012, p. 23.
[4] Milam, 2014.

Gleadhill proposes that 'souvenirs' of other cultures provided Lady Holland with a material context through which she negotiated the boundaries of femininity to display, in the polite space of the salon, the knowledge and taste she acquired by visiting foreign places. Although hardly a cosmopolite, Lady Holland nevertheless understood the relationship between travel and the display of cosmopolitan experience.

This relationship was similarly understood by Maria Fedorovna, who developed a keen interest in plants and gardens while on a Grand Tour with her husband, Paul Petrovich, the son and heir of Catherine II of Russia. Botanical gifts became a primary means through which diplomats and foreign rulers attempted to develop favour with the future empress. In turn, as Ekaterina Heath's essay makes clear, Maria Fedorovna understood the significance of receiving botanical gifts of foreign plants and displaying them in her palace gardens as a performance of her moral and intellectual persona. Cosmopolitan interests in plants from around the world gave her the means through which to display her cultured learning that extended beyond her immediate surroundings at the Russian court. Australian plants are shown by Heath to have special significance in the context of Russian gardens, representing imperial interest in South Pacific and Antarctic exploration, and the development of global economic and diplomatic ties.

Expanding trade networks—specifically between India, Britain, and colonial Australia—are implicated in Laura Jocic's analysis of an evening dress in the collection of the National Trust, once owned by Anna King, wife of the third governor of New South Wales. A material object that embodies the genteel stylistic ambitions of a colonial woman, Jocic brings new research to bear on the conventional assumption of the dress as an imported product. Instead, she proposes that Anna King's dress is evidence of new social demarcations within Australian society, that I would argue could be framed as a cosmopolitan moment of colonial fashionability that recast British styles of dress made from Indian types of fabrics within an Australian context.

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