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book review of

Empress Eugénie and the Arts: Politics and Visual Culture in the Nineteenth Century by Alison McQueen

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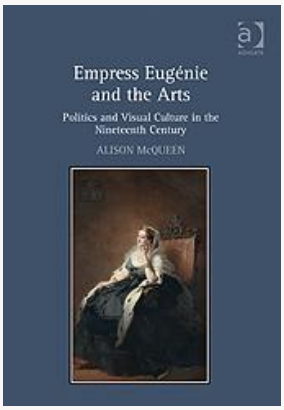

Alison McQueen,*Empress Eugénie and the Arts: Politics and Visual Culture in the Nineteenth Century*. Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2011. 368 pp.; 145 b/w illustrations, 12 color illustrations; bibliography; index. $124.95 (North and South America) £70.00 (rest of the world) ISBN 978-1-4094-0585-6

Women with political power are an enigma to the world. It has been a long road for women to gain political rights, yet—even today—women who hold considerable political authority evoke mixed feelings. For many, it is difficult to understand how leadership can go together with typical female attributes, such as passivity, beauty, or caring. Although this contradiction fascinates us, it can also raise feelings of mistrust. As a result, biographers tend to belittle the professional achievements of female leaders by focusing on personal aspects of their private lives. The same ambiguity informs our understanding of historical personalities. Outstanding women, from Cleopatra to Marie Antoinette, continue to speak to our imaginations. However, popular representations of these women focus on the splendor and decadence of their courts, on the intrigues that their scheming minds organized and on their—often—tragic endings. Rarely are such women treated as capable politicians that fulfilled their responsibilities, successfully or not.

The same is true for the last French empress Eugénie, wife of Napoleon III. She was born as Eugenia de Guzmán, countess of Teba, in Spain in 1826. She married Napoleon at the end of January 1853, less than two months after the *coup d'état* that declared him emperor and marked the beginning of the Second Empire. Although Eugénie was only 26 years old at the time of her marriage, and eighteen years younger than her husband, she soon positioned herself as a public figure of importance. During the first years of her reign, she established her authority as president of many charitable institutions. In addition, she collaborated with the Ministers of the Interior and Public Instruction on various projects, for example reforms of primary education and the juvenile detention system, or the creation of daycare and adoption systems. In 1865 she officially became the head of all French charitable institutions, a task that she took over from the Minister of the Interior. On several occasions she replaced the emperor when he was absent, presiding over the Council of Ministers as regent and signing legislative bills. But even when Napoleon was present, Eugénie regularly attended meetings of the Council of

Ministers. Within the limitations of French law, empress Eugénie thus played a significant political role, especially during the 1860s after she had established herself as a responsible and worthy consort. It was during these years that she further affirmed her role by taking responsibility in international affairs. However, when Napoleon and the Second Empire fell with the capitulation of Sedan, public opinion turned against her. Empress Eugénie became the scapegoat who was accused of having ruined her weak husband and the country through the power of her aesthetic and sexual charms. Until today, this misrepresentation continues to inform many of her biographies.

Startled by the frequent use of secondary rather than primary sources in studies of the empress Eugénie, Alison McQueen began studying the subject in graduate school (xix). Over the last decade, she has published articles exploring topics related to the empress' art patronage.[1] McQueen's most recent book, *Empress Eugénie and the Arts: Politics and Visual Culture in the Nineteenth Century*, can be regarded as a culmination of the author's work on this subject. The book goes beyond the scope of a mere biography. Rather, McQueen reconstructs the figure of Eugénie by focusing on her political achievements and on her activities as a public patron of the arts. In addition, she investigates how the empress was represented in the arts, both in official portraits and in the illustrated press. What emerges is a fascinating account of how the public persona of empress Eugénie was constructed through artworks of all kinds. In her own words, McQueen contends that "through to the end of her life, art in all its diverse forms continued to be the most significant means through which she communicated publicly and enacted the complex politics of her role as empress of the French" (308).

Based on extensive archival research in various countries, McQueen weaves biographical information with visual and historical analyses of various artworks and projects. Indeed, one of the most praiseworthy aspects of the book is the vast amount of source material the author has discerned, mainly letters and other documents concerning official commissions, but also contemporary publications. In addition, many of the works she analyzes have not been discussed in the literature before. This neglect is most tellingly reflected by the fact that the author herself has taken many of the photographs of buildings and artworks that are used as illustrations in the book.

The book is divided into five chapters, following an order that combines chronological and thematic elements. The first chapter examines the first years of empress Eugénie's reign during which she established her public persona as a patron of charities. The main focus of the chapter is on her political work, but McQueen also covers how the empress' charitable activities were represented. In conformity with the traditional values of piety, chastity, and charity that were assigned to female consorts, one of Eugénie's first official acts was to use the credit of 600,000 francs she had received as a wedding gift from the City of Paris for the purchase of jewelry to create a boarding school for impoverished girls. Yet, McQueen argues that her activities went beyond the rather passive female virtues usually ascribed to women. As president of many charity institutions, empress Eugénie was responsible for their administration; she was active in promoting their activities, attracting donors, reviewing reports and inspecting the institutions. McQueen shows that one of Eugénie's central concerns was to advance women's access to education and professional life; many of the social reforms she initiated were meant to further this goal. But in the arts, as McQueen repeatedly shows throughout the chapter, Eugénie's role as independent, active and progressive patron was

downplayed in visual representations that depict her in gendered stereotypes, for example at the side of her husband receiving bouquets of flowers or as an alms-giver to the sick and poor.

The discussion of how empress Eugénie's public persona was constructed is continued in chapter two, where McQueen focuses on the officially commissioned portraits of the empress. McQueen highlights the fact that official portraits represented her as passive and feminine. Often Eugénie is depicted with a vacant gaze in informal settings wearing fashionable dresses. In particular, artists were careful to represent Eugénie as a French woman, since the early portraits that emphasized her Spanish background through clothing, complexion, and activities like horse-riding were negatively received. As Eugénie grew into her role as empress, she commissioned a painting from the official imperial portraitist, Franz Xaver Winterhalter, in which she is represented as a mature public figure. Not surprisingly, it is this image that is chosen for the book's dust cover. Yet, McQueen's research suggests that this, and other representations of the empress as an empowered female figure, met with discomfort and even anxiety among court officials who were successful in restricting the circulation of her more "ungraceful" images. As a contrast to the empress' official portraits, the chapter also discusses private costume ball photographs of Eugénie that were intended for strictly private use during her reign. These photographs of the empress in historic or ethnographic costumes, offer a glimpse of how Eugénie experimented with images of herself outside of the restraints and conventions of the official court record.

Empress Eugénie's activities as art collector are the subject of chapter three. McQueen describes the empress' acquisitions at the Salon and other art sales in chronological order. According to the author, Eugénie followed the taste of her times and mainly bought artworks with "religious, literary, landscape, and genre subjects", as well as some Orientalist works (153). In a few instances, however, her choices became trendsetting, for example when she bought polychrome sculptures by Charles Cordier. In addition to reconstructing Eugénie's collection, McQueen details the rooms of her official and private residences in which the empress exhibited her art works. In particular, the interior design of her public rooms at the Tuileries palace is described at length, based on the surviving drawings of the designs. According to McQueen, it was in these rooms that Eugénie received international diplomats and politicians independently from her husband. They were the "performative spaces in which Eugénie presented herself in a political realm" (210). Most interestingly, the over-door panels in her audience room contained portraits of famous contemporary women with whom she had built alliances. The women were represented as allegories of their countries, and the series thus became almost an *allégorie réelle* demonstrating Eugénie's political power and connections.

Chapter four offers a description of a number of "projects that demonstrate how Eugénie's patronage of the visual arts functioned in an international context" (227). Empress Eugénie's international profile grew during the 1860s and, as McQueen contends, this was represented in her patronage. The discussed projects vary from artworks that were commissioned as diplomatic gifts by Eugénie, works that she received herself, the construction of the *chapelle impériale* in Biarritz, or the restoration of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. This chapter also provides an excellent analysis of the *musée chinois*, a semi-public museum that was opened in 1863 and that was composed entirely of objects "encountered" during "expeditions" in China. The collection was later enlarged with gifts from Asian diplomats. Again, McQueen points out that although the objects were offered specifically to the empress, artists depicted

scenes such as the famous *Reception of the Siamese Ambassadors at Fontainebleau* by Jean-Léon Gérôme as if the diplomatic gifts had been donated to Napoleon III.

The fifth chapter focuses on the period after the fall of the Second Empire. After the capitulation to the Prussians, Eugénie fled to England where she lived in exile until her death in 1920. There, she was reunited with her husband and son, but the deaths of Napoleon III in 1873 and of her son in 1879 left her alone during the remaining forty years of her life. In the first part of the chapter, McQueen investigates caricatures of Eugénie that were made immediately following her flight. The author illustrates how the former tropes of grace, charity and beauty that had defined Eugénie's representations were subverted by transforming her image into the embodiment of excess and court decadence. As McQueen asserts, Eugénie's political agency was derided as physical attraction and she was represented as "'the menace of the feminine' that threatened to corrupt the body politic" (282). These caricatures served to channel existing fears concerning her role as an empowered female figure, but also they "sought to exculpate Napoleon III at Eugénie's expense" (282). According to McQueen, these caricatures successfully dismantled her public persona, which had been crafted so carefully during the previous decades. Ironically enough, at the same time they demonstrate that through her actions, Eugénie had managed to establish herself as a leading political figure; a figure that was perceived as a threat. The second part of the chapter centers on empress Eugénie's efforts to memorialize her husband and son. Part of these efforts was, for example the creation of burial chapels as commemorative spaces for Bonapartist supporters. Eugénie also donated artworks and objects to the French state and municipalities in order to ensure their future preservation and thus, to keep the memory of her family alive.

This summary cannot do justice to the book, which presents an enormous wealth of surprising facts and insights about Eugénie's life and activities, nor to the complex, in-depth analyses of its selected artworks and projects. This combination of biographical information with discussions of a wide variety of artworks is, indeed, one of the book's greatest strengths. McQueen's study enriches our understanding of a woman of power and independence during the nineteenth century; a figure that stands out, even more so since the French were particularly anxious about female participation in politics. One only has to remember that French women had to wait until 1944 before they were allowed to vote. This more biographical narrative of empress Eugénie's achievements is interwoven with analyses of a wide variety of artworks that trace the role of these works in constructing her public persona. As a matter of fact, the "arts" in *Empress Eugénie and the Arts* encompass individual artworks in all media, from buildings, to sculptures, paintings and prints, as well as groupings of artworks like the empress' art collection, the *musée chinois* or the interior decoration of the Tuileries palace. The illustrations that accompany the discussion of these objects are immediately relevant and close to their references in the text.

It would be an understatement to say that the complexity of this study is more than ambitious. Although each chapter treats a diversity of topics, McQueen assures coherence by providing each of them with an introduction and summary that bring the various parts together. Nonetheless, it is exactly this complexity that can be problematic. The author provides so much detail that the central research question is at times difficult to follow. As a result, the threat looms large that the discussions of the different artworks disperse into a loose assembly of case studies, however excellent they may be. In that respect, the book could have benefitted

from a final chapter with a discussion that places the most significant examples in an overall theoretical framework in order to unite the various threads. There are a number of concepts that the author could have utilized to bring together the parts of her book. Notably, ideas that have been developed on agency in the arts in anthropology could offer fruitful frameworks since anthropologists have long been studying artworks as mediators of social agency. Another possibility would have been a discussion that expands upon the concepts of the public-private dichotomy since the distinction between the public and private realms comes up repeatedly throughout the book. These, however, are just minor drawbacks on an otherwise well-researched and eloquently written study.

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Notes

[1] A. McQueen, "Empress Eugénie and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre," *Source* 21/1 (Fall 2001): 33–37; A. McQueen, "Empress Eugénie's Quest for a Napoleonic Mausoleum," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 2/1 (Winter 2003); A. McQueen, "Carpeaux's Vision for Napoleon III: Mourning the Death of an Emperor," *Apollo* 158/501 (November 2003): 39–43; A. McQueen, "Le legs de l'Impératrice Eugénie au musée de la Marine," *Neptunia* 232 (Winter 2003/2004): 57–62; A. McQueen, "Women and Social Innovation During the Second Empire: Empress Eugénie's Patronage of the Fondation Eugéne Napoléon," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 66/2 (June 2007): 170–187; A. McQueen, "Power and Patronage: Empress Eugénie and the *Musée chinois*" in P. Ten-Doesschate Chu, and L. Dixon, eds., *Twenty-First-Century Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century Art* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 153–161.