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book review of

The New Bibliopolis: French Book Collectors and the Culture of Print, 1880-1914 by Willa Z. Silverman

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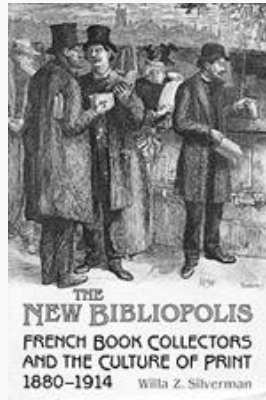
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Willa Z. Silverman

The New Bibliopolis: French Book Collectors and the Culture of Print, 1880-1914 Toronto/Buffalo/

London: University of Toronto Press, 2008

312pp; b/w illustrations; selected bibliography

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The latter part of the nineteenth century in France witnessed an unprecedented explosion of all variety of printed materials. Print culture in France is tied as much to social issues as it is to politics—with an increase in the reading public (fostered by “reading rooms” in addition to less formal sharing of printed materials) as well as the rise of the bourgeoisie, and the development of specific “middle class” novels and illustrated journals. The social and political context leading up to the Third Republic included three revolutions and multiple changes of leadership. Laws that amounted to censorship of the press, which waxed and waned depending on the whims of those in power from Charles X to Napoleon to Louis-Philippe, were finally revoked under Louis Napoleon’s Second Empire. For researchers of this period, the changed structure vis-à-vis print culture is a mixed blessing, for the very laws that restricted publications also resulted in the archival goldmines that are still present in Paris. With the removal of the requirement to deposit an *exemplaire*, printed matter became even more ephemeral after 1881.

Willa Silverman investigates the behind-the-scenes activity that resulted in the production and collection of luxury books. This is an area that is much less well known than other aspects of nineteenth century print culture such as illustrated journals, the history of caricatures and collectible prints. Silverman, professor in Department of French and Francophone Studies and the Jewish Studies Program at The Pennsylvania State University, focuses most of her new book around the somewhat enigmatic figure of Octave Uzanne, a prolific publisher and promoter of book collecting. Unfortunately there is precious little biographical material on Uzanne, who seems not to have descendents to consult. Working from the letters of his contemporaries including correspondence ranging from Félicien Rops to Edmond de Goncourt, Silverman tries to reconstruct Uzanne’s contribution to the period while also examining his obsession with books.

Her approach is thematic in its examination of the effects of changing print technologies and shifting audiences for what were considered “luxury” book editions, as well as the rise of bibliophilic societies, reviews and small presses, and the promotion of books as art at competitive international exhibits. The Société des Bibliophiles François under Baron Picon is presented as the “Old Guard” described by Uzanne as “crazy shrunken book lovers” and a newer type of bibliophilia promoted by Les Amis des Livres was also dismissed by Uzanne as too commercial and tied to a more widespread collecting practice, *bibelotage*. The degeneration into “social circles” is illustrated by souvenir menus designed by Louis Morin and Jules Chéret, as well as the cheap imitation bookbindings of Georges Trautz (whom Uzanne particularly detested). Reviews such as the short-lived *Le Livre Moderne*, and the longer-running *L’Art et l’Idée*, helped shift collecting towards what Uzanne felt was a more selective group, particularly the 160 people he deemed “cardinals” in the Société des Bibliophiles Contemporains, Académie des Beaux Livres. Continuing Uzanne’s mission in the legitimization of contemporary illustrated books were Les Cent Bibliophiles and Les XX, groups that also marked more avant-garde directions for subject matter and design. Les XX also revived interest in *livres anciens* that had become a novelty since other bibliophiles had abandoned them. Avant-garde literary and artistic reviews such as *Le Revue Blanche*, *La Plume* and *Le Mercure de France* also made important contributions to this process.

A new class of amateurs gathered around Uzanne (Paul Gallimard, Eugène Rodriguez, Pierre Dauze) for the promotion of book arts, eventually taking a collaborative role with authors (Jules Barbey d’Aureville, Pierre Louÿs, Jules Claretie, Jean Richepin), artists/illustrators/designers (Paul Avril, Adolphe Lalauze, Albert Robida, Aubrey Beardsley, Félicien Rops, Georges de Feure, Félix Vallotton, Auguste Rodin, Lucien Pissarro, Georges Auriol, Eugène Grasset, Henri Vever), who joined critics Francisque Sarcey, Paul Eudel and bibliographers Paul Lacombe and Jules Le Petit, as well as publishers (especially Albert Quantin) in the production of collectible editions that had been designated as such in advance. This predilection, as well as the consolidation of production, represented an important shift from collecting practices in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, called by Silverman a “retrospective, accumulative approach” to collecting supported by a sequence of individuals operating in isolation from each other. The elimination of boundaries is a general theme that runs through other chapters on the gendered nature of book collecting (that ran the gamut from efforts to masculinize collecting to replacement of wives or lovers by books) and the content of Robert de Montesquiou’s private library that might at first seem unrelated. But two major movements that mirror the shift across previously separate areas—Art Nouveau and Symbolism—are referenced in more than one chapter showing how many tendencies coexisted together or were deeply intertwined.

As with furniture design, technology could be used to aesthetic advantage in the production of books. The details of photomechanical processes are explored, including experimentation with relief photoengraving and Charles Gillot’s use of textured papers, in addition to descriptions of artistic case bindings by Émile Carayon. Uzanne admired the work of William Morris (both with printing and bindings) and further artistic connections are explored, as are disagreements about the extent of social benefits for color printing. The challenge for book promoters like Uzanne was controlling both the production output and the social level of the audience. Léon Conquet, who was operating in opposition to the older publisher J. Pierpont Morgand, initiated strategies that targeted specific markets such as

children's books, holiday books, specialized catalogues and bibliographies including the weekly *Bibliographie de France*. Conquet's death left an expanded audience that could be harnessed with Uzanne's dedication to more exclusive production. Uzanne, in one of his ambivalent rants about industrialization, declared that the masses deserved degraded photo-realistic images and unrefined material in the books they read. Overproduction in general, which lowered quality, combined with the printing of books in multiple formats, and the new favoring of the bourgeois novel over poetry, and even competition from new leisure activities and the small size of Parisian apartments, were seen as obstacles that needed to be overcome by Uzanne and his circle.

While the methodological approach Silverman uses is primarily archival (using material not brought to light previously from the Bibliothèque Nationale's Nouvelles acquisitions françaises, the Archives Nationales, the Henri Vever papers at the Smithsonian, and the Collection of Charles Meunier at the public library in Geneva among many other sources), she also references the work of several key figures. In the discussion of the formation of closed bibliographic societies and the Symbolist content of many of the luxury editions, Max Nordau's *Degeneration* is referenced. The status of books as fetishized commodities is raised by the writings of Karl Marx. Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* is referenced in relation to the shift in social class of the collectors. The mass production of material is supported by the writings by Walter Benjamin about the destruction of an original's aura through mass production. Models of book production and consumption previously set forth by Robert Darnton and Pierre Bourdieu are introduced and deemed as needing revision. A particularly thorny issue is the relationship between mass and limited production models, which are commonly seen in black and white opposition, but in reality a more complex relationship existed not only in the realm of luxury books, but all design disciplines of the period, most notably within the wide-variety of production termed Art Nouveau. Silverman also describes a persistent fascination with "newness" among Uzanne and his contemporaries (Edmond de Haraucourt spoke of "an obsessive hankering after novelty") that was also a complex pursuit that paralleled Art Nouveau design in its incorporation of earlier (Rococo) elements and a tendency to rediscover the past as "new" after a short period had passed.

What is not discussed at any length are the rise of reading rooms and the flourishing of illustrated journals and related commodities explosions represented by the replacement of boutique shopping with large department stores. The quality of secondary materials chosen varies depending on the topic, ranging from the predictable (Deborah Silverman, Colleen Denney and Gabriel Weisberg on Art Nouveau; Ian Millman on George de Feure, Dennis Cate's *Color Revolution* and Michel Melot on color printing) to the progressive (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Elaine Showalter, Emily Apter) and the disappointing (Bram Dijkstra as the sole source of examination of the *femme fatale*). Silverman's chapter on the gendering of book reading, writing and collecting, while examining the notion of separate spheres (the domestic realm of interior decoration denoting bibliophilia as a problematically feminine practice) and the physical fetishization of books (taken to an extreme in the writings of de Sade, Rousseau, d'Aureville, Flaubert and Wilde), and making mention of female writers Uzanne characterized as hermaphroditic *bas-bleus* (Gyp, Rachilde, Séverine), pays precious little attention to the larger movement of feminism and reactions against it during the latter nineteenth century. Uzanne's considerable production and promotion of feminine, fashion-oriented books on accessories (parasols, gloves, muffs, fans) are glossed over and do not give

with Silverman's choice of pithy misogynistic quotes. This chapter could easily be expanded into a freestanding book-length study that could better answer the questions that Silverman poses: "Was the new luxury book [...] an expression of materialism or idealism? Should [these books] be read or simply looked at? Was a book's text to be valued above its images or vice-versa?"

Other problems include the choice of illustrations—seemingly shaped by the decision to use a limited number of sources. Several of the illustrations are photographs of the players and, while this accurately reflects the bibliophilic focus, it gives the actual objects of their attention short shrift. Illustrations ranging from bookbindings to frontispieces to interior illustrations to souvenir menus are only occasionally interpreted in terms of their content and style; Silverman focuses more on the underlying print technologies than the efforts of independent artists. Uzanne's collaboration with Albert Robida, on *Contes pour les bibliophiles* (1895), especially the tale "La fin des livres" forms the basis for Silverman's conclusion, which juxtaposes the turn-of-the-century cautionary tale with today's proliferation of e-books, which manages to make what might seem to be esoteric material more relevant. Nevertheless, those interested in print culture in general, or more specifically in the myriad groups of artists, writers, publishers and collectors mentioned, will want to read this complicated, dense, original and often infuriating book. It requires patience and considerable prior awareness of the era discussed to understand the issues raised and to grasp how all of the topics covered could potentially come together. While Silverman does not fully achieve this in her text, there are numerous paths that can be followed for further research once this volume has been read, as there are many significant concepts buried in this challenging volume.

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