

1740, un Abrégé du Monde

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The exhibition *1740, un abrégé du monde – Savoirs et collections autour de Dezallier d'Argenville* is the result of an ambitious research project established in 2008 at the INHA by Martial Guédron (University of Strasbourg), Anne Lafont (University of Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée/INHA), and Gaëtane Maës (University of Lille). Taking the fascinating personality of Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville (1680-1765) as a case study, this research project aims to explore the links between the arts and knowledge in the eighteenth century. This exhibition is the accumulation of the extensive scholarship undertaken by this research group over the past four years, facilitated in part by the conference *Autour de Dezallier d'Argenville: écrire, collectionner, classer à l'époque moderne* at the University of Lille 3 in March 2010. This strong scholarly backdrop accounts for the high coherence and density of the ideas elaborated in both the course of the exhibition, and its catalogue.

Much more than a monographic exhibition, this project presents a window into the 1740s, a transitional period during which the acquisition and exchange of knowledge, previously confined to the intimacy of the cabinet, began to open out to the public sphere thanks to men of letters like Dezallier. An eighteenth-century Renaissance man, he passed easily from natural history to art history, from gardening to technical sciences, and accumulated a multifaceted collection comprising drawings, engravings, and natural curiosities from far-off lands. While this miniature world gathered together in the confined space of the cabinet aroused marvel and enjoyment, Dezallier also equipped himself with the intellectual tools to allow him to truly analyse and understand these pieces. Hence, for instance, the books and geographical maps that complete the collection, contributing towards its systematisation and promoting the development of knowledge, and its written theorisation in turn.

This process is perfectly staged by the exhibition display chosen by Anne Lafont, curator, and Bruno Graziani, exhibition designer. They cleverly play with the 70-sqm space of an old shop in the Colbert Gallery, installing the exhibition around an elegant counter that recalls the curiosities trade of the eighteenth century. The small size of the venue also forced them to be very selective when choosing the objects for exhibition and to carefully thematise each object's role within the broader scheme of the exhibition. The end result is uncluttered and extremely refined. The spectator is immersed in an atmosphere reminiscent of a period room, and is invited to discover the masterpieces and mirabilia exhibited as one would have done in the eighteenth century.

The items on display are organised around six different themes. *L'image de la curiosité: les dessins du cabinet Bonnier de la Mosson* presents eight splendid

drawings by Jean-Bapiste Courtonne (1711-1781) of the cabinet of curiosities owned by Joseph Bonnier de la Mosson (1702-1744). The illustrations of this collection, kept at the time in a private *hôtel* on rue Saint-Dominique, help to contextualise the exhibition, exemplifying the educational and aesthetic values promoted by the very structure that underlay cabinets of curiosity. The following section, entitled *Exotica: les coquillages et les oiseaux des colonies*, represents the role of colonial products in the establishment of cabinets of curiosities, part and parcel of both the trade and the imagination they fed at that time. The logic of classification inherent to the cabinet of curiosity both tamed the strange and the unknown, and encouraged greater understanding of it.

The engravings of *Théâtre des merveilles de la Nature* (1715) by Vincent Levin (1658-1727), set in the third section, *Merveilles, histoire et sciences naturelles*, exemplify this idea and underline the link between the cabinet of curiosities and the edification of scientific knowledge in the eighteenth century. The books written by Dezallier in turn, organised in the following showcases (*Les livres de l'art et de la nature*), refer to the more general question of knowledge transmission in the age of the Enlightenment; the savant's lifelong dedication to the popularisation of knowledge finds a central place in this section. Open on their frontispiece pages, *La Théorie et la pratique du jardinage* (1709), *Histoire naturelle éclaircie* (1742), and *Abrégé de la vie des plus fameux peintres* (1745-1752), among others, remind the spectator of the abundance and diversity of the treatises Dezallier himself wrote.

The penultimate section of the exhibition, titled *Parterres*, is a fulfilment of Dezallier's appropriation of the term *parterre*, usually associated with the French garden aesthetic, but used by Dezallier in his *Histoire naturelle éclaircie* to describe the symmetric organisation of the objects within his collection. As Charlotte Guichard mentions in the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, the visual pleasure provided by these ornamental compositions is enriched by a strong cognitive dimension, and even betrays patterns of social behaviour. The visual structure of these collections anticipated scientific exchanges and collaborations, and the final section of the exhibition explores how such collections were embedded in interpersonal relationships and professional networks. Here, for instance, Dezallier collaborates with the artist François Boucher (1703-1770), himself also a great amateur enthusiast of shells, for the frontispieces of some of his books.

The strands of investigation pursued by the exhibition are compiled in the remarkable parallel publication edited by Lafont. As she explains in the introduction, this publication extends far beyond a mere catalogue of the exhibition, notably in its originality, its scope and its autonomy as a scholarly contribution independent of the exhibition per se. This book gathers together 27 articles from 20 various authors, structured as an *abecedario*. This is a creative use of a defining literary model of the eighteenth century, itself the product of a thought system based on knowledge classification. The reader progresses through the entries as follows: *Abrégé, Amateur, Basseporte (Madeleine-Françoise), Cabinet, Dessin, École, Fossile, Grottesque, Histoire naturelle, Illustration, Jardin, Kiosque, Laboratoire, Manière, Numérotation, Ornement, Parterre, Plume, Quartz, Rocaille, Système, Table, Unique, Vernis, Vie, Watteau (Antoine), Zoomorphose*. With each page, the concepts addressed by the exhibition are developed in further depth, drawing perceptive links between them, a structure that encourages a nuanced understanding of the themes

at hand. Taken together, the exhibition and its accompanying publication offer an experimental and theoretical space faithful to their subject: the sites of knowledge acquisition and exchange in the 1740s.

'1740, un abrégé du monde. Savoirs et collections autour de Dezallier d'Argenville' is at the Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art, Galerie Colbert, Paris, from 4 May to 27 July 2012.