

Charlotte Guichard *La griffe du peintre: La valeur de l'art (1730–1820)* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2018. 368 pp.; 98 color ill. Cloth €31.00 (9782021402315)

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In *La griffe du peintre*, Charlotte Guichard offers a reflection on the painter's signature in France during the long eighteenth century, both as a sign of artistic identity and as a bearer of value. She convincingly argues that the topic is best served by anchoring analysis at the intersection of various perspectives, simultaneously tracing a "material history of easel painting and a cultural history of signature" (25; all translations are my own). Together, these approaches constitute what the author calls an "anthropology of painting" (23), a method she advocates that proceeds from the network of the actors (artists, dealers, collectors, restorers, etc.) who have inscribed their name in the material object and, by doing so, have invested it with new and manifold values. Thus Guichard's argument not only tackles the subject from the point of view of the painter but also accounts for the part played by the art world in the determination of the artist's identity. This richly illustrated study draws on an impressive array of visual and textual sources: paintings, sales catalogs, exhibition texts and labels, and makers' marks, as well as passports, assignats, and other official and political documents.

The book is chronologically organized, opening with a general overview of the references made to the painter's signature in art historiography from Pliny the Elder to Giorgio Vasari and his followers (chapters 1 and 2) and concluding at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, when the signature took on a pivotal role in Western political and economic practices (chapter 8). The core of the argument lies, however, between these two periods, namely in the eighteenth century. This focus enables Guichard to document the rise of the easel painting, and of its signature, as an essential component of the artistic system of the Enlightenment. According to the author, it was indeed during this era that the easel painting imposed itself as an object "likely to concentrate a thought and an economic value, to be at once an aesthetic artifact and a commodity" (13). To unfold this narrative, the author alternates comprehensive overview passages with a number of case studies treating individual artists, including Jean-Honoré Fragonard and Hubert Robert (chapter 4); François-Joseph Casanova and Philippe-Jacques de Louthembourg (chapter 5); and Catherine Lusurier, Élisabeth Vigée-Le Brun, and Adélaïde Labille-Guiard (chapter 6). Two examples, however, take pride of place in Guichard's argument, given the scope and detail of their analyses: the commercial strategies deployed by Jean Siméon Chardin around his name (chapter 3) and Jacques-Louis David's use of his signature to promote his fame (chapter 7).

The chapter dedicated to Chardin plays with an idea formulated by Denis Diderot in his *Salon* of 1769, in which the critic applied the term *griffe* (claw) to the artist's highly characteristic brushwork: "Chardin needs only a pear, a bunch of grapes to sign his name. *Ex ungue leonem*. And woe to he who cannot recognize the animal by its claw" (77, 91). Guichard reminds the reader that *griffe* bore different meanings over the course of the eighteenth century, one of which designates an instrument employed to mechanically reproduce a handwritten signature. She shows how both significations, the singularity and the reproducibility of the *griffe*, may be brought together to better understand Chardin's subtle staging of his name. Indeed, Guichard stresses that the painter had very early on defined his signature, in cursive letters, and that it remained unchanged throughout his career. He inserted his signature in most of his paintings—generally in very visible locations—although this practice was still regarded as unusual. The same principle applies to the prints commissioned by the artist after his paintings, in which the signature was always accurately duplicated. As a result, Chardin's signature became, as much as his style, a distinctive feature of his artistic identity, and its presence an expected component of his production. These strategies enabled the artist to serially reproduce and sell some of his works, like *The Return from the Market* or *Soap Bubbles*, without compromising his reputation

or the commercial value of his paintings. In contrast, as Guichard asserts, by playing with the slippage “between repetition and difference, between unique and multiple, down to the signature, Chardin fueled the desire for his paintings” (99). Through his signature, the artist thus produced a reflection on the value of his art and on the status of the easel painting as “a commodity, authenticated and esteemed” (105).

Compared to Chardin, David was preoccupied less with his success in the contemporary art market than with his name in posterity. Guichard emphasizes how the painter meticulously orchestrated, protected, and secured the prestige of his name, even while working at the head of a workshop—organized very much on the Renaissance model—that significantly contributed to his creations. The author observes that, with *The Death of Marat* (1793), David started to sign his historical and official paintings in capital letters. In Guichard’s view, this change corresponds to the moment when the artist “decides to write his name in History” (230). By associating his signature so visibly and so closely with illustrious figures such as Jean-Paul Marat, Louis-Michel le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau, and even Pope Pius VII, David firmly tied his name to the great men represented and made his own way into history. In this context, the exact place occupied by David’s signature within his works is of paramount importance. Guichard notes that, oddly enough, seemingly incidental objects (like a pedestal, horse martingale, sword scabbard, dog collar, etc.) were often singled out by David as vehicles for his signature. According to the author, such choices reflected David’s love for artifacts—an almost archaeological passion for antique material culture, in fact, that can be traced back to the artist’s Roman sketchbooks and even earlier to his training in the workshop of François Boucher. Guichard reads this practice as an act of (re)appropriation: “David signs his painting and he signs the object, which he thereby reinvests with his personal presence” (251). By inscribing his name on artifacts disseminated in his paintings, David not only calls the attention of the beholder to them but also assigns them a more personal meaning, by connecting them to his creative process.

As perhaps is evident from even such brief précis, these case studies clearly demonstrate the originality of *La griffe du peintre*. In this way the publication is entirely in keeping with Guichard’s previous works, *Les amateurs d’art à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Champ Vallon, 2008) and *Graffiti: Inscrire son nom à Rome, XVIe–XIXe siècle* (Éditions du Seuil, 2014). More importantly, the book offers a new and subtle take on the artist’s signature by stepping beyond the bounds of the discussion since the 1970s, which considered it merely as a textual element within an image (see, e.g., Michel Butor, *Les mots dans la peinture* [Albert Skira, 1969], and Meyer Schapiro, *Words and Pictures: On the Literal and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text* [Mouton, 1973]). Despite this obvious achievement, however, the reader quickly gets the impression that the volume was a bit rushed into print. The numerous repetitions in the author’s phrasing make for a lack of flow between successive parts and eventually render the reading redundant (see, e.g., 251–54: the idea that David signs the painting on the objects and, in so doing, appropriates them materially and personally appears at least four times). This does not mirror Guichard’s thorough research, nor does it serve her extremely interesting advocacy for an “anthropology of painting,” a conception that, in the long term, will prove a powerful methodological instrument for thinking about the easel painting and its signature.

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