

Antiquarianism and the Visual Histories of Louis XIV: Artifacts for a Future Past.

Robert Wellington.

Farnham: Ashgate, 2015. xx + 258 pp. \$109.95.

Amid the statues, plays, paintings, gardens, and tapestries that were produced to convey the glory of Louis XIV and his *siècle*, medals have almost completely escaped notice, perhaps because they no longer form part of our own cultural vocabulary. And yet, as

Robert Wellington's book convincingly argues, credited with a durable truthfulness that written sources were seen to lack, medals in fact occupied a privileged position in seventeenth-century visual culture.

The Académie des inscriptions, initiated by Colbert and better known as the Petite Académie, oversaw the production of medals that would provide a reliable record of Louis XIV's deeds and accomplishments. By connecting seventeenth-century medal production to antiquarian culture, Wellington is able to emphasize that this record was ultimately, and even primarily, meant for future historians who would one day consider the Sun King's reign with the same fascinated attention with which seventeenth-century collectors studied the ancient world. This attention to posterity shaped the Petite Académie's most notable accomplishment: a magnificent volume, published in 1702, that reproduced the medals visually while supplementing their image and *devise* with short written explanations of both the event commemorated and its allegorical representation. Wellington takes care to depict the difficult ideological debates and decisions that surrounded this work, noting how the imperative to represent history faithfully often ran against the no less pressing need to portray Louis XIV as the sole agent of history. Wellington accounts for other aspects of the Petite Académie's project that compromised the antiquarian ideal of objectivity, noting that the volume, itself a response to the more objectionably objective (and eventually politically compromised through a savvy counterfeit edition) book produced by Claude Menestrier, did not just describe medals already in existence, but occasioned the fabrication of over a hundred new medals to render its portrayal of a continuous string of extraordinary events complete.

Wellington also admirably fleshes out the larger context in which the Petite Académie's volume and its accompanying medals were produced. He guides us through the centrally placed *cabinet des médailles* at Versailles, where Louis XIV was able to contemplate the most comprehensive collection of coins and medals in Europe, including a continuous series of French coins that in itself provided a powerful testimony to the age, legitimacy, and precedence of the French Crown. Wellington also notes the influence of medals on other artistic production, including Le Brun's decoration of the ceiling in the Versailles Hall of Mirrors and the famous portrait by Rigaud commissioned in 1700, in which the king's realistically aged face reflects the antiquarian commitment to transmitting an unaltered portrayal of the monarch to future generations.

At times, however, Wellington's extensive knowledge of medals and the culture surrounding them underscores his glancing treatment of other subjects. Wellington's conclusion that Chapelain's description of the medal's device as consisting of a "body and soul" reflects the influence of Cartesian philosophy seems hasty, and completely neglects the more likely influence of emblems, which are only mentioned in passing two chapters later. Likewise, Wellington's analysis of the sonnet that serves as the introduction to Menestrier's medal book completely overlooks the poem's concluding celebration of Louis XIV's "suppression of heresy." While Menestrier's inclusion of such

language is no doubt a timely reference to the king's revocation of the Edict of Nantes a year earlier, it also invites a consideration of the ways in which the representative capacities of words and images — and the ability to reconcile them in the medal — became politicized through the long, uneasy coexistence of Protestants and Catholics in the French kingdom. This avoidance of religious subtext informs Wellington's portrayal of royal agency. His assertion that the push to depict the king as the sole author of historical events stemmed from "the cult of the individual formed during the Renaissance" (13) is simplistic, and ignores the painstaking construction of divine-right monarchy undertaken in the intervening years.

These objections merely serve to demonstrate Wellington's welcome ambition of connecting the seventeenth-century royal medal to larger cultural currents and concerns. In keeping with its theme, this thoroughly researched, beautifully illustrated book should serve as an invaluable resource for many years to come.

Ellen McClure, *University of Illinois at Chicago*