

Carl Goldstein. *Print Culture in Early Modern France: Abraham Bosse and the Purposes of Print*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xvi + 222 pp. \$99. ISBN: 978-1-107-01214-1.

The title of the book raises expectations. It promises that the oeuvre of this quintessentially Parisian printmaker, publisher, and treatise writer of the *grand siècle* will be illuminated by the methods of a relatively new form of cultural history. The author has previously contributed much to the study of Abraham Bosse. And, frankly, any study taking a fresher, deeper look at prints in Paris during this period of exploding development in French printed imagery would greatly expand this field, which is currently narrowly conceived and thinly researched. Sadly, the book does not live up to its title. It takes little from the study of print culture over the last twenty-five years, and never really addresses the “purposes of prints.” As a study of Bosse’s activities and his images it does, however, point the way forward toward new questions that should be asked about the world of print in Paris in the middle years of the seventeenth century.

Goldstein begins his book with a quotation from Elizabeth Eisenstein’s 1979 study *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, in which she explains her choice to focus on the printing press — that is, on the phenomenon of printing itself — rather than the individual printer. He then immediately reverses her paradigm-breaking choice, in order to focus instead on Bosse alone as solitary agent of change. He divides his study into brief chapters that address distinct areas of Bosse’s production, from his treatises on printmaking, on distinguishing originals and copies in art, and on perspective, to his prints of everyday life, scenes of theater and comedy, religious images, and portraits of the king. Despite explicitly trying to wriggle out of the constrictions of monographic study, Goldstein remains fully within it. He brings in

Callot at the beginning and Poussin at the very end, but what was needed here was to embed Bosse's work in the world of Callot and Stefano della Bella in Paris, comparing his complex oeuvre to the multivalent output of Israël Henriet and Israël Silvestre, Claude Mellan, and Claudine Bouzonnet-Stella among others.

If he invokes Eisenstein only to contradict her premises, he puts Roger Chartier's works in his extensive bibliography, without their having any visible impact on his text. None of the sensitive analysis of elements such as typeface, format, *mise-en-page*, types of editions, size of print run, and their mutual connections to the social usage of printed texts, which Chartier brilliantly deployed to shed light on issues of reading and reception, have their corollary here. Goldstein does raise the fascinating issue of word-image relations in the single-sheet prints of Bosse. He writes about the relation of the rather allusive and sometimes quite literary texts in the prints' inscriptions to the represented subjects within the images. And he raises the important issue of multiple receptions made possible by the relation of word and image in the prints. But time and again he asks questions about reception only to respond in a frustratingly opaque way. Concerning Bosse's series dealing with the *querelle des femmes*, he says that "All in all, Bosse's images of women are so mutable that misogyny and feminism cease to be meaningful categories" (74). Tenuous links between word and image, perhaps due to the division of labor between the work of the printmaker and that of writers and cutters of his inscriptions, mean that permanent ambiguity of meaning is the order of the day. Goldstein makes much the same point in his chapter on Bosse's religious prints, which he sees as neither speaking plainly to Calvinist nor orthodox audiences. True, perhaps, to a point — but in this study, the emphasis on ambiguity tends to sound like a failure of interpretation rather than a profound point about print culture.

A final regret is that the prints are presented here rather badly, in muddy photographs. They deserve better. There have been two recent studies of Bosse, one an exhibition catalogue and the other a traditional monograph, which will both give the reader more to look at than this study. But both are in French. As an ambitious study written in English, this book will certainly fill a gap in the literature and be of use to students of art history.

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