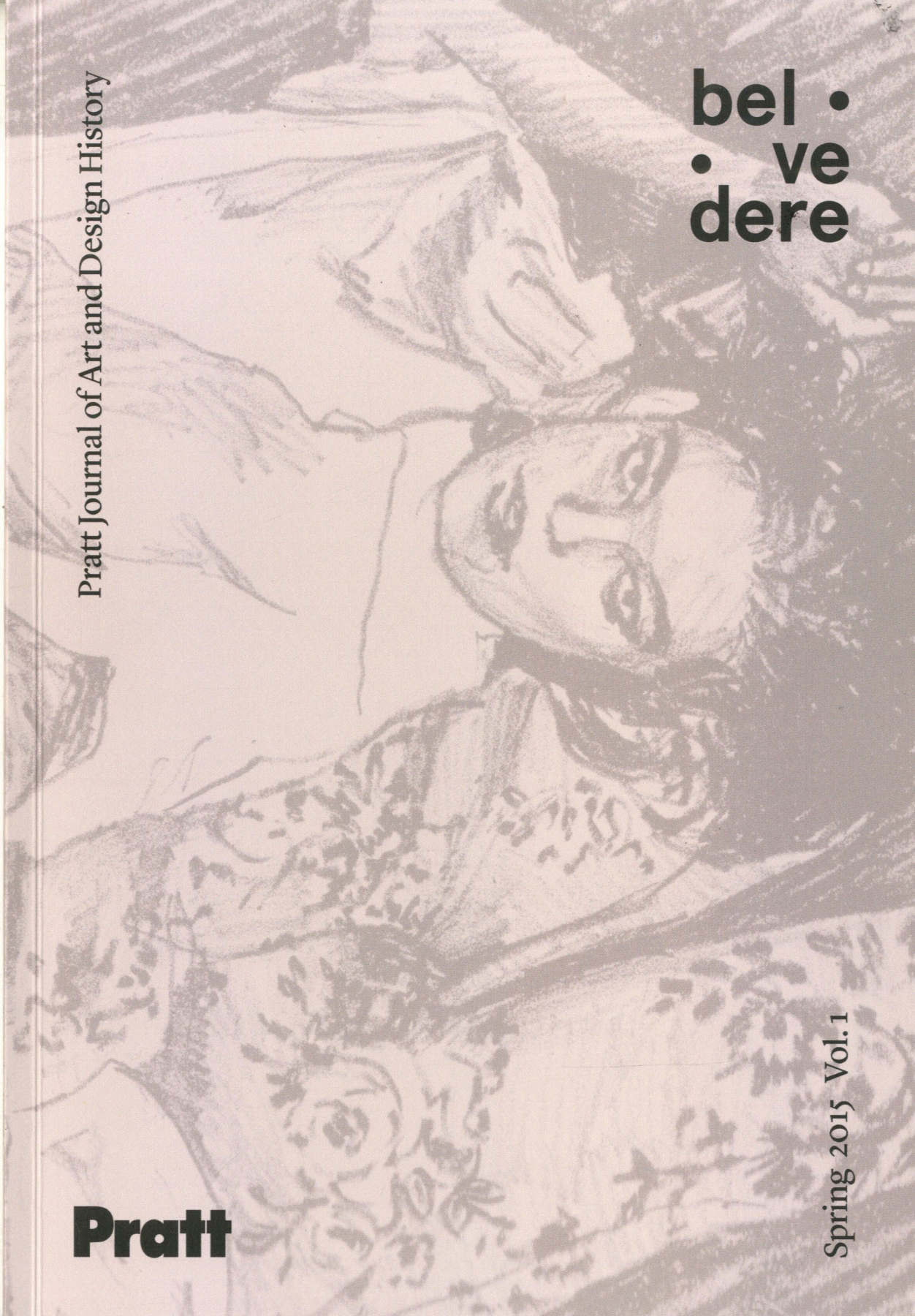


Pratt Journal of Art and Design History

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Spring 2015 Vol. 1





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*Italian. Literally, "beautiful view"; first known use: 1593. Merriam-Webster, 2014.*

## Contents

### *Exhibition Reviews*

- 8     *PHOENIX: XU BING AT THE CATHEDRAL  
CHURCH OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE*  
Adam Monohon
- 11    *SCULPTURE UNDONE, 1955-1972:  
ALINA SZAPOCZNIKOW AT MOMA*  
Anthony Vasquez

### *Featured Folios*

- 14     Margaret Matz  
Julia Shinay  
Diana Bowers

### *Short Papers*

- 18     GAY OUTLAW'S *TINNED WALL/DARK  
MATTER AS ANTI-MONUMENT*  
Diana Bowers
- 24     DISTINCTIONS OF TASTE IN  
18TH-CENTURY FRANCE  
Natalia Torija-Nieto
- 30     BEYOND TRANSPARENCY:  
A DISCUSSION AROUND GLASS  
IN 19TH-CENTURY PARIS  
Lara Allen
- 37     VITRUVIUS AND PALLADIO: CLASSICAL  
BEGINNINGS  
Natalie Draeger
- 41     HERMANN OBRIST: PROPHET OF  
ABSTRACTION  
Walter Schlect
- 48     *AMERICAN TEACHERS AND HIGH  
SCHOOL: A COMPARISON OF TWO  
DOCUMENTARIES*  
Annalise Welte
- 52     BIBLIOGRAPHIES

## Foreword

While *belvedere* is the brainchild of a select group of Pratt History of Art and Design students—the first editors—this inaugural volume is the result of collaboration among many. Its realization from conception to hard copy happened remarkably fast: in less than a year—but to all eager to hold the final product in hand its progress was at times maddeningly slow. Founding and publishing a magazine is a demanding enterprise in any situation, but to do so with a constantly changing student population is a particularly daunting undertaking.

Indeed, the first volume of *belvedere* was begun by its first editors but completed by the next group. They all must be applauded for finishing the project and working on the next volume while pursuing full-time graduate or undergraduate study. *belvedere* is testimony to their engagement with their subject and their enthusiasm for the discipline.

The papers in this volume were written for courses in Pratt's Department of History of Art and Design. Fueled by the many museum and site visits that are part of our courses or inspired by research sojourns, such as our Pratt in Venice summer program, they offer a sampling of the diverse work done in the department with its different degree programs. I extend my congratulations to the contributors and praise for their dedication and hard work, as well as very special thanks to the two editorial boards that brought the journal to life: the founding editors Ashley Kelleher, Diana Bowers, Katherina Fostano, and Anthony Vasquez and the current editorial board of Catarina Flaksman, Sarah Hamerman, John B. Henry, and Adam Monohon.

The Department of History of Art and Design expresses special thanks to Dean Andrew Barnes of the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences for providing seed money for the journal and to the Student Government Association for additional support.

Dorothea Dietrich  
*Chair, Department of History of Art and Design*



# Distinctions of Taste in 18th-Century France

NATALIA TORIJA-NIETO

*Although taste is personal and there is no strict definition of “good” or “bad” taste, significant existing background gives us certain guidelines into what may be considered acceptable. This evidence dates back to the eighteenth century, specifically in France. I have taken the French as case study, around the time when the short-lived rococo took a turn into neoclassicism. In studying contemporary architectural treatises, pattern books, and encyclopedias, just how style began to be dictated among the people of the Enlightenment becomes evident, contrasting the new aristocrats with other up-and-coming Parisian citizens who were driven toward imitating the rococo style.*

What is it that makes taste acceptable or not? Who declares whether something is too daring or not enough so? Is taste solely related to gender? The first notorious interior designers and fashion stylists in eighteenth-century France were men, but for a long time it had been the women in the Château de Versailles—beginning with the Marquise de Montespan, Louis XIV’s mistress—who had been the official dictators of taste. Focusing on eighteenth-century France, I theorize that it is not just a question of male or female taste, but rather the adaptation of one’s own preference within the style of a certain time period.

To further approach the subject of taste, it is crucial to define first the terms taste and style. Leora Auslander writes: “*Taste* has been understood to be innate and emotional yet capable of improvement through education; individual and idiosyncratic yet absolute; transcendent of time and space yet socially constituted. Style, in contrast, has been understood to be historical

This paper was written for  
*History of Interior Design*  
(HD360), taught by Anca Lasc  
in fall 2013.

1 Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996)

2 John Pile, *A History of Interior Design* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005), 176.

3 Joan E. DeJean, *The Age of Comfort: When Paris Discovered Casual—and the Modern Home Began*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 37.

4 *Ibid.*, 31.

5 Frederick C. Green, “John Law,” in his *Eighteenth-Century France: Six Essays* (New York: Ungar, 1964).

6 *Ibid.*, 18.

7 DeJean, *The Age of Comfort*, 36.

and specific, resulting from either collective effort or individual genius.”<sup>1</sup> In order to make these distinctions and understand their meaning, I will focus on 18th-century France, a key period in which major changes took place in style, art, design, and overall culture. I will focus particularly on the shift that occurred after the reign of Louis XIV along with the emergence of the Enlightenment.

When the first 18th-century French interior designers and tastemakers became known, the social stratifications had shifted. The opulence of Versailles was no longer the only place to look when searching for the finest taste in fashion, architecture, and interior decoration. The majestic monarchy that the “Sun King” built was subdued during Louis XV’s reign. The arts were focused on creating a style that would pair with a new way of thinking; not only was there a concern for choosing the right decoration and materials, but there was also a need to arrange spaces according to *commodité*, defined through functionality, practicality, and comfort. Even the king himself desired leisure and privacy more than the rigid and strict moral guidelines that had previously set the rules of conduct at the court.

The aristocracy of the rest of Europe turned to France, emulating the French grandiose style in their own palaces. From 1736 to 1789 in France, rococo became the predominant style. It was “imported and imitated in Austria and Germany and had considerable influence in England as well.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, in Paris, a new kind of aristocracy emerged. The nobility was beginning to mix with the bourgeoisie. Marriages for financial reasons were common.<sup>3</sup> The new upper class built large town houses known as *hôtels particuliers*. Also, for the first time, private enterprise was funding cutting edge architectural projects such as the Place Vendôme, an important square located in the first district or *arrondissement* of Paris.<sup>4</sup>

These events took place due to an important economic shift that resulted in more money for the middle class. The extravagances of Louis XIV left France in deplorable economic conditions following the Sun King’s death in 1715. During this period from 1715 to 1723, best known as the *Régence*, a Scottish financier named John Law arrived in France with a project intended to stabilize France’s economy. He devised a plan that would get France back on the right financial track: a national bank based on paper currency, followed by a greater enterprise, the *Compagnie des Indes*, a major trading company established in India by the European colonies. Law led people to speculate blindly and major investments took place.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, “Law, in encouraging speculation had lighted a blaze which, with all his craft and the resources at his disposal, he was powerless to extinguish. In the train of speculation came a wave of crime and a passion for luxury unparalleled in French history.”<sup>6</sup> British literary scholar Frederick Green refers to a time when greed was the order of the day and people would turn to the unthinkable—murder—to get what they wanted. As expected, the economic bubble eventually burst and only a few were able to keep their jobs, among them interior designers.<sup>7</sup>



Meanwhile, a new expression entered the Parisian vernacular around the year 1721. People spoke of the nouveaux riches and the millions they spent on their idea of good taste. These new millionaires had the freedom to be dictators of style, which meant that it was no longer up to the nobility to set the tone. People with the means could decorate, dress, and acquire artwork as they pleased.

This movement became a distraction and therefore a conflict for philosophers and intellectuals who wanted to set France on the right track following the ideas of the Enlightenment. These ideas were mostly discussed at the salons, “an actual historical horizon for the Enlightenment, a public sphere that sought to extend the 17th century ‘Republic of Letters’ to society as a whole via the mechanism of aesthetic experience and taste.”<sup>8</sup> One of the most notable of the salons was the Salon Carré at the Louvre, instituted by Jean-Baptiste Colbert in the mid-17th century, which was open to the public, for anyone to enjoy an array of artworks selected by the *Académie*.<sup>9</sup> This was not an artistic/literary salon, however, where people were accustomed to gathering privately and discussing current political or philosophical issues. Rather than being set in a magnificent location such as the Louvre, the famed Parisian salons of the 17th century created a more amiable space that fostered the discussion of ideas disregarding social hierarchies. These salons were led by women, which resulted in a total shift from the previous academic salons. “Under the guidance of Mme. Geoffrin, Mlle. de Lespinasse, and Mme. Necker, the salon was transformed from a noble, leisure institution into an institution of Enlightenment. In the salons, nobles and non-nobles were brought together on a footing of equality.”<sup>10</sup> One of the most influential female figures of the Enlightenment was the Marquise de Pompadour, Louis XV’s favorite.

Although these women were commonly referred to as the *précieuses*—frequenters of the salons seeking entry into the nobility and the court—they saw themselves rather as *philosophes*, intellectuals leading the salons through the ideas of the Enlightenment.<sup>11</sup> This represented a different kind of wealth, one related to the sharing and discussion of knowledge. On the one hand, people with power and the means to show it were interested in aesthetic extravagances to pair up with their lifestyle. On the other hand, people of noble blood, while not nearly as rich, were nevertheless striving to conserve the classical traditions of antiquity and the *grand siècle*. In an essay on luxury based on Mme. Fontaine-Martel’s salon, the Marquis de Lassay writes that “it was better by far to be noble and needy than *roturier* [commoner] and rich.”<sup>12</sup> In her chapter “Taste—Good and Bad,” Katie Scott describes this overwhelming dichotomy:

By the 1730s and 1740s the elision of cultural and commercial modernity had become so common an ideological reflex that critics of the rococo or *goût*

8 Saul Anton, “Style and History in Diderot and Winckelmann,” in *Style in Theory: Between Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Ivan Callus, James Corby, and Gloria Lauri-Lucente (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 73.

9 Ibid., 74.

10 Dena Goodman, “Enlightenment Salons: The Convergence of Female and Philosophic Ambitions,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22, no. 3: Special Issue: The French Revolution in Culture (Spring 1989): 331.

11 Ibid., 331–32.

12 As cited by: Katie Scott, *The Rococo Interior: Decoration and Social Spaces in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 233.

13 Ibid.,

14 Anton, “Style and History,”

15 Johann J. Winckelmann, “On the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks,” in *Writings on Art*, ed. Johann J. Winckelmann and David G. Irwin (London: Phaidon, 1972), 61.

16 Anton, “Style and History,” 79.

17 Denis Diderot, *Diderot Encyclopedia: The Complete Illustrations, 1762–1777* (New York: Abrams, 1978).

18 Denis Diderot and Jean L. R. Alembert, *Menuisier en Meubles* (Paris: Briasson, 1765).

19 Chairs, benches, chairs/seats, armchairs, wing chairs, sofa bed, duchesse-style sofa-bed, bed, and wardrobe (translation mine).

*moderne* could count on the connection automatically being made between new style and new wealth, a suggestion reinforced by the clustering of such value laden terms as ‘chaos’, ‘disorder’, ‘revolution’ and ‘licence’ [sic] in their descriptions of the style’s salient features.<sup>13</sup>

Denis Diderot, one of the most renowned critics of the salons, wrote of the difficulties that emerged with the popularity of the rococo style. He was concerned that this style would “corrupt the vigor of classical French history painting, and [called] for a return to the *grand goût*. This ongoing obsession with decline is also an important impetus to the emergence of neoclassicism.”<sup>14</sup>

The pride of the French was incomparable at this time and it grew stronger with the ideas of the Enlightenment. The individual could be seen as an intellectual, as a connoisseur, as an epicurean, and/or as a tastemaker. A concern arose for educating the French toward an inimitable style, one that would put them above all other nations in Europe. For Johann Winckelmann—noted German historian of the Enlightenment—this style was that of the Hellenic age of Greece, for he said: “There is but one way for the moderns to become great, and perhaps unequalled; I mean by imitating the ancients.”<sup>15</sup>

The philosopher Denis Diderot was one of Winckelmann’s most zealous readers.<sup>16</sup> Together with Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, they put the French at the center of Europe by editing the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*. This encyclopedia included numerous collaborations from architects and philosophers among others, setting the right tone for envisioning modern Paris. The *Encyclopédie* provided information that ranged from agricultural and rural economy, surgery, military arts and natural history, to artificial flower making, cabinetry and other crafts.<sup>17</sup> In other words, a compendium of overall knowledge of the world was now available and an answer to every question could be found by consulting this array of collaborative entries.

The section in the *Encyclopédie* titled “*Menuisier en Meubles*”<sup>18</sup>—a carpentry manual—was used to aid woodworkers in building the basic yet most fashionable pieces of furniture that any complete home should have had at the time, such as *sièges*, *banquettes*, *chaises*, *fauteuils*, *bergères*, *canapés*, *duchesses*, *lits de repos* and *armoires*.<sup>19</sup> It even includes a section on the calipers with which each piece of wood should be made according to its whole. These instructions served as guidelines for the construction of each individual piece as well as their overall assembly. This practical manual was among many in the vast *Encyclopédie* and is a great source not only to get an idea of the specific styles and forms of furniture at the time, but also to understand how manufacturers got access to assembly instructions for designs that were popular at the time.



Exterior architecture, though less emphasized, was not completely overlooked compared to Andrea Palladio's *Quattro Libri dell'Architettura* (16th century, Italy), accessible to various audiences including Thomas Jefferson in America. Architects such as Jacques-François Blondel and Pierre-Jean Mariette created books with guidelines for architecture that were available widely. Blondel, in particular, was a noted professor who strove to develop an architectural education with principles that would enable local and international students at the École des Arts to have a solid foundation on classicism while also being exposed to the modern examples of the day.

Architectural historian Freek Schmidt notes: "Thanks to Blondel's new educational program, these architects returned home in full control of the design process and with a profound knowledge and awareness of theory and history."<sup>20</sup> Blondel developed in his students a sense of individual appreciation and a sense of taste. He believed that a knowledgeable architect could "free architecture of the type of individual interests that only encouraged capricious behavior and reduced architecture to a fad vulnerable to the issues of the day."<sup>21</sup> Blondel recognized the importance of learning from what he would consider ugly or unpleasant in the same way that he would encourage his students to look at work that was more historically significant to him.

Moreover, the periodical *Mercure de France* offered the most recent news on various subjects such as science, medicine, social events, and poetry for a more general audience.<sup>22</sup> Amy Wygant, a scholar of seventeenth-century French literature, states: "The *Mercure* stayed afloat by generating continuous encomia in exchange for royal patronage, and by inviting reader participation in the form of discussion fora on particular topics, causing it sometimes to be compared with an early form of discussion list or blog."<sup>23</sup> Its availability introducing the latest trends from all over France played an important role in the adaptation of style; from then on, the French had the freedom to adapt their own style by learning from this modern-style magazine.<sup>24</sup>

Once people had access to these publications regularly, the elevated taste once exclusive to the court at Versailles was readily available to the modern city dwellers. Since the *Mercure*'s coverage of the Petit Trianon in 1673—originally built as a modest house for members of the royal family to escape from the pomp and ostentation of Versailles—and with the new richly illustrated books, people talked and read about all the different styles—*à la royale*, *à la mode*, *à la française*.<sup>25</sup> Even *le goût Pompadour*—meaning the influence of the Marquise de Pompadour on taste—had become a current and well-known language, almost a synonym for rococo.<sup>26</sup>

Since he was one of the most influential architects of the time, Blondel's opinion on the rococo mattered, and it was one of particular contempt.

20 Freek H. Schmidt, "Expose Ignorance and Revive the 'Bon Goût': Foreign Architects at Jacques-François Blondel's École des Arts," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 61, no. 1 (March 2002): 4.

21 Ibid., 14.

22 *Mercure de France*. October, 1736. Gallica. Accessed: 11/29/2013.

23 Amy Wygant, "Le *Mercure Galant*: Présentation de la Première Revue Féminine d'Information et de Culture, 1672-1710 (review)," *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* 63, no. 1 (January 2009): 86.

24 John L. Nevinson, *Origin and Early History of the Fashion Plate* [EBook #34472], 79.

25 DeJean, *The Age of Comfort*, 151.

26 Ibid., 163.

27 Schmidt, "Expose Ignorance," 12.

28 Auslander, *Taste and Power*, 2.

Schmidt writes about the certain "climate" which had to do with the variety of choices available to the public and the newly emerging middle class's constant desire for imitating a lifestyle of opulence:

As a result of the frivolous architectural climate of the first half of the century and "the spirit of novelty that reigns among the public," architecture was degraded . . . Without the presence of a chef *suffisamment éclairé*, an overseer capable of supervising an entire project, architectural works seemed to follow "the charms of fashion." A lack of balance between interior and exterior ornament and architecture had reduced the importance of the architect, who was no longer the central figure in the building process. Variety spoke louder than principle.<sup>27</sup>

Auslander writes that it is not that people simply choose to find things beautiful or ugly but that they come to find certain aesthetic forms desirable for reasons that they are not necessarily aware of, "nor do they find their judgments changeable at will."<sup>28</sup>

Within each time period and culture, while being ruled by a standard style that might be dictated by "political" or "civil" terms, as Auslander states, people may also find their own way of recognizing suggestions of taste and therefore develop a personalized appreciation for different styles. France has been, since the beginning of the eighteenth century, constantly reinventing itself; it has since been a culture that is, to this day, emulated worldwide because of its inimitable sophistication. We continue to see this persistent transformation further into the nineteenth century with Napoleon III, when Haussmannization (1853-70) brought Paris into an era of brand-new urban embellishment. But regardless of these restructurings, the French are known always to remain firm within their classical roots without shunning the avant-garde, and it is precisely this intertwining that makes it possible for such a vibrant culture to continue building up in this manner.

Taste is undoubtedly a subjective matter; nevertheless it has always been paired with refinement and connoisseurship. The French are known always to have had a concern both for literacy and for lavish pleasures. This is why France is the perfect case study to get a sense of how and when we can make these distinctions of taste thereby illuminating the French heritage that is still very much alive today.

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