In this pioneering study, Alison McQueen examines an important and yet largely overlooked phenomenon: the engagement with the visual arts of Empress Eugénie, wife of Napoleon III. McQueen draws upon her extensive work in the archives throughout Europe and years of sustained consideration of this subject to argue that Eugénie’s patronage and collecting activities were distinctly political in nature, critical to the fashioning of her private and public personae, and central to the art world. A declared aim of this book is to challenge “the coherence of studies on art in nineteenth-century France” (5) by showing how Empress Eugénie’s involvement in the visual culture of the Second Empire puts pressure on traditional art-historical narratives about this period.

Given the groundbreaking nature of the topic and the rich material surveyed in this book, the introduction is surprisingly brief. McQueen does little to provide the reader with a sense of the state of research on Eugénie, the various sociohistorical and theoretical contexts at play, or the patterns and proclivities of her patronage, collecting, and self-representation. She eschews the customary roadmap to the book, which surveys the general contents of individual chapters. The reader thus begins this voyage into uncharted terrain with an unclear sense of Eugénie’s aesthetic tastes and values or the nature and significance of her contributions to the visual arts.

The book’s first chapter considers how Eugénie mobilized those values deemed feminine in her early imperial commissions and representations. McQueen argues that the aim of one of Eugénie’s first acts as an empress—the creation of the Fondation Napoléon, a boarding house for impoverished French girls—was to establish her autonomous position within imperial culture and to provide a model of female leadership that blended progressive and traditional elements. McQueen also argues that the images of Eugénie from these early years, in a range of media from painting and sculpture to stained glass and prints, portrayed her as pious, charitable, and committed to education. These representations were critical to molding her public identity, and this process of self-construction, McQueen claims, was modeled after historical figures such as Marie-Antoinette and Joséphine Bonaparte.

In the second chapter, McQueen explores Eugénie’s active participation in the creation of a public image that conveyed virtuous femininity through the vehicle of imperial portraiture. She contends that the empress recognized the need to overcome her status as a foreigner, and that these portraits allowed her to combat negative stereotypes by producing alternative representations of herself. McQueen covers the many painted portraits by Franz Xaver Winterhalter, including the well-known Empress Eugénie Surrounded by her Ladies-in-Waiting (1855), along with lesser-known but nonetheless noteworthy painted portraits by Édouard-Louis Dubufe as well as a number of sculpted portraits. The most fascinating works treated in this chapter are the informal photographs of the empress in historical and national costumes. Commissioned by Eugénie for personal use, these artifacts present a distinctly different persona than suggested in the official, public portraits. McQueen notes that these private photographs enabled Eugénie to exercise an “unprecedented level of agency” (126). Given the private nature of these photographs and their extremely limited circulation, however, the significance of the exercise of this agency remains unclear. These provocative photographs deserve greater contextualization: they should be analyzed alongside the painted orientalist and avant-gardist art of the Second Empire, discussed within the framework of role-playing in early photography, and examined for the theoretical implications of a privileged woman’s travesti in an era in which the seeds for the New Woman were being sown.

The next chapter of McQueen’s book examines Eugénie’s role as patron and collector. Here, McQueen draws on the wealth of information she has gleaned from the archives to document the objects the empress acquired, including by what means they were obtained, their cost, and how and where these works were exhibited during her reign. Unfortunately, while McQueen has done a valuable service to fellow scholars on this period, the sheer volume of this material is overwhelming at times. The mode of presentation makes it difficult for the reader to discern the general principles that governed Eugénie’s patronage and display practices—hence the importance of her activities as a patron and collector are sometimes overshadowed by minutiae. If McQueen selected a few exemplary works and exhibitions for discussion, and included complete data on all of the objects as appendices to the book, it would have been easier for the reader to discern the empress’s core aesthetic values and collecting patterns.

That said, this chapter convincingly demonstrates Eugénie’s status as a highly influential patron, collector, and even protector of artists. The empress’s tastes were eclectic: she purchased works from artists from different countries, time periods, and aesthetic orientations in a wide range of media. Eugénie’s careful supervision of the exhibitions of her collection at public venues such as Versailles and Malmaison speaks to her commitment to the arts as well as to the
McQueen provides a thoughtful discussion of Eugénie’s apartments at the Tuileries, including the salon bleu, where the empress held court. She shows how its decorative scheme, with a cycle of portraits of contemporary femmes illustres, attests to Eugénie’s investment in female leadership and its place within the landscape of contemporary global politics.

The globalization that occurred during the Second Empire is central to the fourth chapter, which examines several of Eugénie’s globally oriented artistic projects, namely the musée Chinois in the château at Fontainebleau, the imperial chapel at Biarritz, and the restoration of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. McQueen deems these enterprises as indicative of Eugénie’s engagement with and considerable place in global cultural politics. She maintains that Eugénie’s “intercultural subject position” (242) as a Spanish-born empress of France enabled her to negotiate artistic projects in foreign lands, use the visual arts as a diplomatic tool, and cultivate her image abroad.

The book’s final chapter and the epilogue consider the Empress Eugénie and the arts after the fall of the Second Empire in 1870. McQueen shows how the French press demonized the empress in caricatures that were suggestive of how “she was both recognized and feared as a female political figure in the public domain and was perceived as a foreign-born threat to the social body of France” (271). The virulence of these images not only do much to explain the vicissitudes of Eugénie’s reputation; they also portend, as McQueen proposes, the difficulties that late nineteenth-century Frenchwomen would encounter in overcoming stereotypes of the political female figure. Eugénie would spend her last fifty years in exile, mourning the loss of her husband and son and using the arts as a means of preserving their memory and shaping their public identities postmortem.

In the opening pages of the book, McQueen tells the reader of her chosen perspective and broad aims. She claims to assume a “radical viewpoint” (5) from which to begin answering questions regarding Eugénie’s participation in the arts—the consideration of primary source documents. To be sure, McQueen’s seemingly exhaustive archival work is truly impressive. But where does the radicality of this approach inhere? McQueen positions herself as a defender of an art-historical practice undervalued by scholars engaged in contextual and theoretical modes of inquiry. This declaration is perplexing as a few sentences later she indicates her hope that this book will “suggest how profitable it can be to combine approaches grounded in primary sources and informed by critical theory” (5). Alas, the privileging of documenting and detailing Eugénie’s every engagement with visual culture over framing and theorizing these practices and objects means that the meta-issues of this study, such as female leadership, patronage and collecting, the use of art in the construction and maintenance of public identity, and art’s contributions to imperial rule at times are obscured. Critical theory is a lens that is rather sparingly and unevenly used in this book, and one senses that McQueen is not entirely convinced of its usefulness. To my mind, a more thorough and consistent use of feminist, postcolonialist, and social art theories in the analysis of both general trends as well as specific objects would have been productive. Moreover, it seems that in focusing on primary documents, important secondary literature that would have nuanced and deepened McQueen’s discussions was overlooked. In order to understand and value Empress Eugénie’s art-related activities, these need to be positioned relative to other developments in mid-nineteenth century art and culture. McQueen might have enhanced this study by mining the rich field of existing scholarship on the dynamics of power, gender, and race during this period.

Indeed, McQueen could have better established the ideological frameworks, sociopolitical and economic realities, and gender politics of mid-nineteenth-century France, contexts that would have enhanced her analysis of Eugénie’s performances as patron and public figure. Greater attention to contemporary thought and practice vis-à-vis women and religion, philanthropy, education, politics, and art seems critical to understanding the ways in which Eugénie and her entourage elected to fashion her public identity through visual culture. Although McQueen rightly sees these constructions and activities as constituting a trans-historical dialogue with her French foremothers, it is surprising that she does not draw comparisons with her contemporary, Queen Victoria—the most visible female public figure at that time, and certainly a model for Eugénie. Moreover, McQueen’s analyses of the empress’s philanthropic activities, art patronage, and use of visual media would have benefited from connections with existing scholarship on Victoria’s practices in these areas.

In sum, with Empress Eugénie and the Arts: Politics and Visual Culture in the Nineteenth Century, McQueen presents a treasure trove of information on Eugénie’s involvement with the visual arts, and this book will serve as an invaluable resource on the subject. This is an ambitious study that argues for the empress’s exemplary status as a supporter of the arts and as a public figure who recognized and exploited art’s political potential. Furthermore, this book demonstrates the necessity of revising traditional frameworks used to discuss Second Empire French art and culture, and, thus, McQueen’s book promises to generate fruitful scholarly conversations for years to come.

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