Empress Maria Theresa and the Politics of Habsburg Imperial Art
by Michael Yonan
Penn State Press, 2011

Empress Eugénie and the Arts: Politics and Visual Culture in the Nineteenth Century
by Alison McQueen
Ashgate, 2011

Reviewed by Olivia Gruber Florek

Portraits of powerful women have long been contested sites in the history of art. This was certainly the case for the Habsburg Empress Maria Theresa (1717–80) and Empress Eugénie of France (1826–1920), whose portraits and artistic commissions are the subjects of recent books. Neither monarch has received the art historical attention devoted to queens such as Marie Antoinette, Marie de’ Medici, or Catherine the Great, but authors Michael Yonan and Alison McQueen accomplish more than a filling of this scholarly gap. Through visual analysis, political contextualization, and meticulous archival research, they uncover multifaceted networks of political and gendered concerns that shaped the visualization of Maria Theresa and Eugénie.

Maria Theresa was one of the few female sovereigns who gained her throne by heredity. Though she buttressed her authority by establishing a co-regency with her husband, Francis Stephen of Lorraine, and after his death with their son, Joseph II, it was Maria Theresa herself who directed imperial diplomacy throughout her reign. Michael Yonan examines the challenges of embodying this complex political arrangement through case studies that combine to reveal what he calls Maria Theresa’s “monarchical identity,” a “fictive image of the ruler, a construction not necessarily reducible to a single textual reference or painting, but a collective ideological tissue born of various statements, legends, actions, and representations” (6). As archival resources from this period are limited, Yonan pairs biographical information with exhaustive visual analysis to tease out political messages in a wide variety of media.

Yonan addresses foremost the difficulties of representing a female absolute monarch, for the question remained whether a woman could be the direct communicator with God. Maria Theresa answered this concern by producing a multitude of children, whose presence in her portraits demonstrated future Habsburg dynastic strength. While acknowledging these group portraits, Yonan saves his most insightful critique for Martin van Meytens’s State Portrait of Empress Maria Theresa (ca. 1750; Fig. 1), in which the empress wears an intricate lace coverlet gifted by her Belgian provinces. Yonan

Both “one’s options in the home, workplace, or public spaces,” as well as setting “boundaries on acceptable male and female behaviors” (167). Thus the artists participating in the decoration of the Woman’s Building “did not aspire to rid themselves of their femininity but rather to make the feminine a more elastic and inclusive category” (167). In modernizing “outmoded definitions of womanhood that ideologically restricted woman to home and family,” they “sought to recalibrate the feminine, to enlarge woman’s sphere so that future generations could aspire to a broader band of activities and happier lives” (167). Such gendered rhetoric derived from judgments based on an assessment of “inherent femininity” (168), yet for these women working in the 1890s, this was often a careful strategy of negotiation, balancing complicity and resistance regarding their roles. A key challenge was “how to visualize women in the fine arts during an era of intense struggle over woman’s issues” (181). Nevertheless, the Fair “helped launch woman’s quest for artistic parity and equal opportunity” (188). Cassatt’s mural received the strongest criticism. She was the most successful of all the artists whose work was featured in the Woman’s Building and had aimed the highest. Her critiques reveal “the era’s coded rhetoric for uppity women” (176).


Charlene G. Garfinkle has contributed informative biographies of many of the women who contributed artworks or were associated with the Woman’s Building. The literature on the Fair is immense, and Garfinkle did an exemplary job in distilling a list of well-chosen archival, period, modern, and web sources. (Her research on several of the stained glass windows created for the Woman’s Building by Boston women artists is found in this issue on pages 32–38).

Women Building History is a splendid scholarly achievement, and Corn’s artfully argued monograph is a landmark contribution to American cultural studies.

Betsy Fahlman, Professor of Art History at Arizona State University, writes on American art. Two of her recent publications are Kraushaar Galleries: Celebrating 125 Years (2010) and New Deal Art in Arizona (2009).
identifies an iconographic interplay between references to Habsburg territories within the gown’s needlework and other symbols of divine authority, all of which combine to project the empire onto the surface of her body.

The depiction of power became more problematic during Maria Theresa’s widowhood, as, normally, a widowed empress retreats from public life. Maria Theresa did not yield her position, though the representation of this power manifested itself more subtly. This is evinced by Yonan’s analysis of a jeweled snuffbox created by Franz von Mack, Antonio Bencini, and others, which was gifted by Maria Theresa to her brother-in-law. The snuffbox features portraits of her living children, with her two oldest sons and heirs depicted on the lid. Though these men appear initially to possess the most powerful position, the largest portrait is of Maria Theresa herself on the snuffbox’s base. This arrangement reveals her as the source of power behind her offspring, many of whom occupied thrones in Europe’s most noble houses.

Yonan’s remaining case studies examine how Maria Theresa’s authority was pictured at Schönbrunn Palace, the imperial country palace in Vienna that received significant expansion under the empress’s tenure. At Schönbrunn, even in the absence of explicit portraits, Maria Theresa used visual culture to make visible her role in promoting Habsburg dynastic health. This is particularly evident in the Vieux-Laque Zimmer, a rococo fantasy of Chinese lacquered wood alternating with family portraits, including Pompeo Batoni’s 1770 copy of his double portrait of Maria Theresa’s sons, Joseph II and Leopold. Produced under Maria Theresa’s direction, this later version inserts a sculpture of Minerva, a figure associated with the empress that visually asserted her continued control over Habsburg diplomacy.

The empress’s power receives a similarly multivalent treatment in the Millionen-Zimmer, Maria Theresa’s reception room. Decorated with découpage and collaged Mughal illustrations, this room referenced Vienna’s unique diplomatic relationship with Eastern cultures. Here Yonan examines the visual culture of découpage, the practice of cutting up papers that became a system of knowledge. Its presence positioned Maria Theresa as a powerful monarch whose control over the east was demonstrated through the intricately cut images that surrounded her.

In his final chapter Yonan identifies perhaps the most overt assertion of Maria Theresa’s authority: a sculpture of Egeria within the gardens of Schönbrunn. Erected above the site of the freshwater spring for which the palace was named, the sculpture references the nymph Egeria, the wife and political advisor to the early Roman King Numa. In addition to Egeria’s identity as the political mastermind behind Rome’s development, the allusion links Maria Theresa with the kingdom to which her Holy Roman Empire was heir. Yet, even here, her power is indicated indirectly. Removed from the main promenade of the gardens, the sculpture visualizes how Maria Theresa allowed someone else to assume the center position, while she actually maintained power from the sidelines.

In Empress Eugénie and the Arts: Politics and Visual Culture in the Nineteenth Century, Alison McQueen also navigates the difficulties of visualizing a powerful female sovereign. Nineteenth-century French anxieties over women in the European counterparts, and Eugénie’s reputation bore the brunt of this distrust in the years following the fall of the Second Empire. McQueen’s study does much to rehabilitate perceptions of the French empress. Rather than a political opportunist with archaic artistic preferences, in McQueen’s book Eugénie emerges as a leader for women’s social justice and a thoughtful patron of the arts. For though Salic law prevented the empress from inheriting the throne, McQueen argues that Eugénie used the visual arts as the primary means to establish an autonomous position beyond that of consort.

McQueen’s book is especially noteworthy for her painstaking archival research, by which she reconstructs all of Eugénie’s charitable and artistic commissions. This is evident in her first chapter, which is devoted to Eugénie’s charitable work. Eugénie was remarkably progressive in her altruism, especially with regard to women’s rights; however, artists diminished her role in much of the visual culture depicting her activities. For though McQueen’s research reveals Eugénie’s active oversight of her charitable societies, artists instead portrayed her as simply accompanying her husband, Emperor Napoléon III. This observation sets up a tension at stake throughout the rest of McQueen’s analysis, as Eugénie struggles to balance her own ambitions as a diplomatic figure with the demand that she be suitably submissive.

This tension is particularly evident in McQueen’s chapter on Eugénie’s portraits. By far the most intriguing study in the book, here McQueen examines how portraits of the empress...
satisfied Napoléon III’s 1853 promise that his bride would be “the ornament of the throne” (80). Pairing visual analysis with contemporary critiques of painted and sculptural portraits, McQueen uncovers disapproval surrounding representations that did not suitably erase Eugénie’s Spanish heritage or that granted her authority independent of her husband. McQueen also studies how Eugénie’s private patronage resulted in more nuanced portraits, in contrast to the publicly disseminated images. This is most apparent in Franz Xaver Winterhalter’s Empress Eugénie in an Ornate Chair (1862; Fig. 2), where Eugénie appears enthroned and engaged in deep thought. Installed in the hôtel de l’Impératrice, a private home Eugénie reserved for her Spanish relatives, here the empress could portray herself as an intelligent and authoritative woman. Also analyzed in this chapter are a series of remarkable photographs of Eugénie in costume. Privately circulated, these photographs document Eugénie’s apparel at popular costume balls where formal attire was relaxed and guests could assume alternate identities. Photographs may have prolonged this pleasure for the empress, and she appears here in the guise of an odalisque, an eighteenth-century aristocrat, and a Turkish bride, among other costumes. These portraits allowed Eugénie to express her sensuality and free herself from her own traditional cultural boundaries. Such thoughtful interpretations make one wish that McQueen could have devoted as much space to visual analysis in her subsequent chapters.

In her third chapter, McQueen reconstructs chronologically Eugénie’s artistic acquisitions during her imperial reign. Eugénie was a significant patron of contemporary art, and her possessions were in high demand for exhibitions both domestically and abroad. Though Eugénie has been criticized for preferring artists like Cabanel in the age of Manet, McQueen notes that political considerations would have prevented Eugénie from collecting controversial artworks. Despite this fact, her collections were progressive, including landscapes by Corot and Courbet, as well as patronage of Rosa Bonheur and Charles Baudelaire.

McQueen blends diplomatic contextualization with a history of Eugénie’s politically motivated artistic commissions to reveal how the empress used the visual arts to promote French aspirations internationally, particularly in Latin America. Of the several case studies in this chapter, the most engaging is McQueen’s analysis of Vicenzo Vela’s sculpture Christopher Columbus, which Eugénie commissioned in 1864 for the Mexican city of Veracruz. By 1867 the French army had withdrawn from Mexico, leaving Emperor Maximillian to be executed by troops led by former President Benito Juárez. Eugénie demonstrated remarkable foresight in 1866 when she altered the destination of her commission instead to Colombia, where her gift would be received as a magnanimous gesture rather than a reminder of failed French colonial interests.

The final chapter analyzes Eugénie’s artistic commissions during her long exile, in particular those that honored her deceased husband and son. McQueen begins the chapter with an examination of how Eugénie’s reputation was maligned by vitriolic caricatures immediately following her exile. All of her charitable activity, careful visual construction, and political acumen were erased from public memory by caricatures that punished Eugénie’s imagined body in the absence of her physical body. McQueen ties these cruel illustrations to a specifically French anxiety over women in the public sphere.

Yonan and McQueen provide important examinations of these hitherto overlooked monarchs, especially in English language scholarship. Their indexed and beautifully illustrated volumes include detailed annotations of their archival resources, which allows future scholars to bring the visual culture of Empress Maria Theresa and Empress Eugénie into greater conversation with parallel artistic activity.

Yonan’s and McQueen’s success in linking the patronage of these empresses to the political and artistic currents of their respective ages demonstrates the folly in divorcing such figures from our study of avant-garde artwork in early modern and modern eras. For though absolutism was increasingly retrograde by the lifetime of Maria Theresa and certainly Eugénie, our understanding of social art history and particularly female portraiture is incomplete without a consideration of these monarchs and their peers among the European aristocratic elite.

Olivia Gruber Florek earned her PhD in Art History from Rutgers University. Her dissertation was titled “The Modern Monarch: Empress Elisabeth and the Visual Culture of Femininity, 1850–1900.”