11-3-2011

REVIEW: Dairy Queens: The Politics of Pastoral Architecture from Catherine de' Medici to Marie-Antoinette by Meredith Martin

Jean-François Bédard

Reviews by Category
African Art (sub-Saharan)
Architectural History/Historic Preservation
Art of the Middle East/North Africa
Art of the United States
Artists' Books and Books for Artists
Arts Administration and Museum Studies
Ceramics/Metals/Fiber Arts/Glass
Chinese Art
Contemporary Art
Critical Theory/Gender Studies/Visual Studies
Decorative Arts/Textiles/Design History
Digital Media/Animation
Drawings/Prints/Photography/Works on Paper
Early Christian/Byzantine Art
Early Medieval/Romanesque/Gothic Art
Egyptian/Ancient Near Eastern Art
Eighteenth-Century Art
Film/Video
Graphic/Industrial/ Object Design
Greek/Roman Art
Japanese/Korean Art
Latin American/Caribbean Art
Native American
Nineteenth-Century Art
Oceanic/Australian Art
Outsider/Folk Art
Performance Studies
Pre-Columbian Art
Prehistoric Art
Renaissance/Baroque Art
Sculpture/Installation/Environmental Art
South/Southeast Asian Art
Twentieth-Century Art
World Art

About *caa.reviews*

Questions? Contact *caa.reviews*
Go to collegeart.org

November 3, 2011

Meredith Martin
Dairy Queens: The Politics of Pastoral Architecture from Catherine de' Medici to Marie-Antoinette
Harvard Historical Studies, vol. 176. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011. 336 pp.; 82 color ills.; 8 b/w ills. Cloth $45.00 (9780674048997)

Jean-François Bédard

CrossRef DOI: 10.3202/caa.reviews.2011.122

Among the most fanciful objects commissioned by the French monarchy is a pair of Sèvres porcelain pails designed for Marie-Antoinette's pleasure dairy at the Château de Rambouillet. They are shaped like *tinettes*—wooden buckets used on ordinary dairy farms for making fresh cheese—and painted with wood grain to imitate their rustic models. Like Marie-Antoinette's mock hamlet at Trianon, the Rambouillet pails are outlandish inventions of the pastoral movement in literature and art, which celebrated naturalness with contrived theatricality. As the ill-fated monarch so cruelly experienced, bourgeois sensibilities soon lashed out at this noble ostentation. To pre-Revolutionary critics of the society of orders, a queen masquerading as a dairy maid in a luxurious simulated farm was particularly odious. Marie-Antoinette's pastoral persona triggered venomous accusations of social irresponsibility, political usurpation, and even sexual deviance that contributed to her downfall and still taint her reputation.

The pastoral has not always elicited such heated reactions. In her amusingly titled book, Meredith Martin sets out to rehabilitate this courtly art form. Looking beyond the alleged frivolity of pastoral art and architecture, Martin emphasizes the crucial role they played in the social and political self-fashioning the French nobility, most notably the queens, forged for itself. Her discussion focuses on the pleasure dairy—known in French as the "laiterie d'agrément," or "laiterie de propreté," to distinguish it from the functioning dairy (*laiterie de préparation*). Adhering closely to her 2006 dissertation at Harvard University, Martin examines dairies commissioned by the monarchy and other members of the French elite, from the Valois court to the end of the ancien régime. She discusses Catherine de' Medici's pleasure dairy at Fontainebleau, the dairies at the menagerie of Versailles, the Condé estate of Chantilly, Madame de Pompadour's hermitages, Marie-Antoinette's *laiterie* at her Trianon hameau, and the spectacular Queen's Dairy at Rambouillet. Martin's study draws on the abundant literature since the 1990s dealing with the role played by the visual arts in the construction of female subjectivity in modern France. Authors such as Laura Auricchio, Sheila ffoliott, Dena Goodman, Melissa Hyde, Sarah Maza, Katie Scott, and Mary Sheriff, among others, have shown how female artists and patrons alike used art to broker their status in the hierarchical, patriarchal society of the ancien régime. Martin makes a convincing case for the importance of pleasure dairies as sites of empowerment for French noblewomen.

In the second chapter, Martin examines Louis XIV's appropriation of the nominally female space of the dairy to promote his own project of absolute kingship. The menagerie designed by Louis Le Vau at Versailles, like most, included a working farm and dairy. Here, Martin follows the analysis of Louis Quatorze visual culture in political terms developed by Claire Goldstein in *Vaux and Versailles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). Martin refers specifically to Goldstein's concept of "royal parthenogenesis," the unisexual male model of creation promoted by Louis XIV to supplant the traditional account positing intercourse between "masculine" art and "feminine" nature. Martin's reliance on Goldstein's notion perhaps explains her tendency to interpret architectural form exclusively in terms of gendered political propaganda. For instance, citing Michel Foucault, Martin sees the "phallic" plan of the Versailles menagerie as representative of a panoptic male gaze. While Foucault does identify the menagerie's central pavilion as an early example of the panopticon, he does not comment on its apparently "speaking" plan. It is hazardous to construe Le Vau as a precocious Ledoux.

In the same chapter, Martin examines how Louis XIV's transformation of the menagerie in 1699 for the personal use of Marie-Adélaïde of Savoy, Duchess of Burgundy, sealed his project of female domestication. She finds echoes of Louis XIV's enterprise in the admonitions against emancipated women voiced by François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon and, later, the physiocrats and Jean-Jacques

In the same chapter, Martin examines how Louis XIV's transformation of the menagerie in 1699 for the personal use of Marie-Adélaïde of Savoy, Duchess of Burgundy, sealed his project of female domestication. She finds echoes of Louis XIV's enterprise in the admonitions against emancipated women voiced by François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon and, later, the physiocrats and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Despite the king's claim to sole political legitimacy, his rivals—the Duchess of Montpensier, the Duchess of Maine, and the Condés at Chantilly—cunningly fought his authority by staging pastoral performances in dairies and hermitages of their own.

A fascinating account of the revival of Hippocratic medicine grounds Martin's third chapter, which centers on Madame de Pompadour's patronage. Mid-eighteenth-century followers of Hippocrates, upholding their Greek predecessor's belief in the restorative powers of country living, prescribed fresh air and sunlight, exercise, and natural foods, including fresh milk, to patients stressed by the court and the city. On the advice of her physician, François Quesnay, Louis XV's mistress ordered the construction of several hermitages to implement his neo-Hippocratic recommendations. Erected near the royal palaces and at her domain of Crécy-Couvé, these splendid retreats were equipped with farms and dairies. Madame de Pompadour even commissioned a new form of porcelain vessel, designed specifically for drinking milk. Martin demonstrates that by adopting the accoutrements of the "female hermit," Madame de Pompadour sought not only to fortify her delicate constitution but also wanted to make herself over as a healthy royal companion. She thus countered the charges of "infecting" the king with her allegedly diseased body and pernicious influence on public affairs. Marie-Antoinette drew upon Pompadour's example when, faced with similar insinuations, she too chose to conjure the charms of "pastoral" nature.

Martin devotes her compelling last two chapters to the ill-fated queen, exploring two dairy projects realized for Marie-Antoinette that neatly encapsulate the contrasting uses women made of pastoral architecture: on one hand, as liberating spaces of self-invention and, on the other, as symbols of a repressive "natural" order that reaffirmed male control over docile, fertile, maternal women. For contemporary detractors, Marie-Antoinette's famous *hameau* at her estate of Petit Trianon definitely belonged to the first type. Overseen by the queen herself with the help of her personal architect, Richard Mique, this mock hamlet became in the public's mind the absurd site of all manners of noble excess, from the pecuniary to the sexual. As told by Martin, the Count d'Angiviller, superintendant of the Royal Building Works, commissioned the exquisite Queen's Dairy at Rambouillet in a futile effort to quell public grievance against the Austrian-born queen. D'Angiviller's *anti-hameau* at Rambouillet promoted physiocratic agricultural improvement as it sought to transmute a repugnant queen into a benevolent Amalthea reborn in a womblike primeval grotto. The count's allegory of royal regeneration failed to save a queen who too often disregarded her public duty as royal consort for the private cultivation of *sensibilité*.

Throughout her fascinating account, Martin reiterates the conflict between female self-governance and male royal propaganda that pleasure dairies crystalized. More attentive editing might have eliminated some repetitiveness, undoubtedly a consequence of the book's origin as a dissertation. These restatements sometimes obscure the potential for familiar symbols to take on new meanings. For instance, d'Angiviller's use of the Amalthea myth to shore up Marie-Antoinette's imperiled queenship seems no different from Catherine de' Medici's earlier staging of the same story, despite the emergence of radically new concepts of individuality, society, and authority between their respective enactments. To Martin, Amalthea served in both cases to sublimate flesh-and-blood, sexualized queens into political ciphers serving the dynastic power. Less willfully political interpretations might result in a more nuanced account. More fully developed examinations of ornamental dairies sponsored by men, such as Charles Boutin's at his garden of Tivoli, Jean-Joseph de Laborde's at Méréville, and Claude Baudard de Saint-James's at the Folie St. James, all touched on by Martin, could also sharpen considerations of the specific ways women appropriated pastoral rituals. However, these remarks in no way diminish Martin's achievement. *Dairy Queens* will take its rightful place among other intellectually ambitious discussions of those whimsical examples of architecture and material culture that shed a unique light on the values of court society.

Jean-François Bédard
Associate Professor, School of Architecture, Syracuse University
jbedard@syr.edu