The Art of Louis-Léopold Boilly. Modern Life in Napoleonic France by Susan L. Siegfried
Review by: Beth S. Wright
Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press. Sponsor: American Society for Eighteenth-
Century Studies (ASECS).
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/30053856
Accessed: 10/03/2014 22:43

The 150th anniversary of the death of Louis-Léopold Boilly (1761–1845) was marked by renewed attention to his innovations in genre painting and portraiture, his exhibition and media strategies, and his trompe l’œil virtuosity. Susan L. Siegfried (Research Projects Manager of the Getty Art History Information Program), acting as guest curator, assembled forty-four of his works in the first comprehensive exhibition outside France to be devoted to this artist. The exhibition opened at the Kimbell Art Museum (November 5, 1995–January 14, 1996) with a two-day symposium, and then traveled to its only other venue, the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (February 4–April 28, 1996).

Fascinating works abounded, from the celebrated *The Triumph of Marat* (1794; Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille) to the first public showing of *Thirty-Five Expressive Heads* (c. 1823–28; William I. Koch collection), Boilly’s experiment with caricature and optics. Visitors could also see a superb table-top still life (c. 1803–14; Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille), where a double self-portrait appears to be tossed “down” next to coins, quill pens, playing cards, and “broken glass.” Direct viewing greatly facilitates our appreciation of how successfully Boilly’s grisaille or sepia oil paintings simulate graphic media. Happily, the artist is well served by the excellent illustrations in Siegfried’s book. The latter is neither a catalog of the exhibition, nor a biographical assessment of Boilly’s career, but rather a study of his art as a construction of social meaning in the public sphere during the critical period between the French Revolution and the end of the Bourbon Restoration.

Siegfried’s aim is to “raise questions about the culture and society of his time relating to issues of gender, class, and the politics of art” (ix). Her methodology incorporates influences from the school of cultural studies led by Lynn Hunt, literary theory, and feminism. Her analysis proceeds simultaneously on many levels, explicating topical events and mores, patronage and the art market, the dissemination of the composition or subsidiary figures through ancillary works, and contemporary psychic tensions. For example, Boilly’s Directory satires of social types, such as *The Incredible Parade* (c. 1797; private collection, Paris), are read against an array of

visual and textual sources which range from contemporary fashions as codes to class and political
stance through quotations from Sébastien Mercier’s *Le Nouveau Paris* (1798) and government-
sponsored journalism. Siegfried argues that these satires disclose “the bankruptcy of political
language” (78) and “the disruptive effects of money and leisure” (81) and express middle-class
anxieties about social inversion and political corruption. Discursive footnotes offer suggestions
for further reading; a formal bibliography would have been welcome.

The structure of the book is generally chronological, although similar works
from different periods are considered together. Chapters are devoted to Boilly’s Rococo boudoir
scenes after his arrival in Paris in 1785, his response to Revolutionary events, social mores during
the Directory, gendered portrait roles and the identity of the artist, the construction of leisure,
and, finally, eroticized spectatorship and *trompe l’oeil* illusionism. Three fundamental, intercon-
nected issues are genre painting as “spectacle,” the artist as entrepreneur, and self-referential mim-
esis as a “dialogue between representation and viewing” (xi).

Siegfried sees Boilly’s “user-friendly” form of genre painting as “less a moral
configuration than a spectacle, with no strongly articulated narrative or hierarchical order” (x).
By this she means more than a merely additive extension of the viewing experience through mul-
tiple compositional foci. Thematic and expressive meaning is ruptured when alternate or contra-
dictory cues link figures to each other or to the spectator. This non-linear approach to narrative
was evident in Boilly’s works from the beginning of his career. Rococo erotic intrigues were well-
suited to such an approach, for innuendo was preferable to action, which would close off erotic
arousal. In *Take This Biscuit* (c. 1790; private collection, Paris), the theme could be a closed one,
a young couple’s growing desire for each other, but their gaze at the viewer/voyeur suggests an
invitation to a *ménage à trois*.

This cross-linking of characters and solicitation of the viewer is marked in
Boilly’s urban crowd scenes. As Siegfried points out, they frequently center on public displays of
personal values or aesthetic response, thus implicitly including the viewer as a participant. In the
pendants *The Free Performance* and *The Effect of Melodrama* (both 1820s: Musée Lambinet,
Versailles), Siegfried argues that compassion and gaze are activated according to social class. The
concerned members of a bourgeois family turn toward their swooning wife or mother, who forms
the center of a pyramidal composition. In contrast, the compositional unity of the other panel is
repeatedly broken. The gawking, lower class viewers are not similarly centralized, but orient them-
selves across the spectator’s space to the pendant panel.

Boilly’s compositional fragmentation is due in part to his method of readjust-
ing and reusing figures in his “inventory.” In her discussion of *The Entrance to the Turkish Gar-
den Café* (1812; private collection, Australia), Siegfried points out not only the economic ratio-
nale for this method, but the disturbing aesthetic implications of generic characterization. Boilly’s
figural solutions (particularly children) sometimes verge on geometrical abstraction; it is discon-
certing to see them juxtaposed to portraits or accurate descriptions of canine breeds. Siegfried sees
in the result “the haunting in his work of the disaggregation of modern life” (150). Such a
sociological commentary may have been his intention or simply an unavoidable consequence of
his procedure. In either case, compositional collage contradicted genre painting’s assumed goal of
direct repetition of a pre-existing scene. Boilly was representing not the world but himself as artist.

He advertised himself by drawing attention to his method, quoting from ear-
ier works, and evoking different media in an “ironic interplay between different levels of reality”
(120). In his painting *A Collection of Drawings [with Boilly and Elleviou]* (c. 1800; private col-
collection, Paris), we see Boilly in a self-portrait, a sepia “print” under “broken glass” of his portrait of
an actor which he had exhibited at the Salon two years before, and two “signatures.” Above all,
we are aware of his wit and craft. In breaking the “frame,” Boilly contradicted his simulation of
graphic reproduction, and insisted that his creation was unique. Siegfried’s methodological innov-
ations have resulted in a work which is rich in insights, one which will be welcomed by scholars
in eighteenth-century studies.