

Joan Coutu. *Then and Now: Collecting and Classicism in Eighteenth-Century England.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. Illustrations. 318 pp. \$110.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7735-4543-4.



Reviewed by Alison V. Scott

Published on H-Albion (January, 2016)

Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer College)

Focusing on four significant collections of classical sculpture begun in the middle of the eighteenth century, *Then and Now: Collecting and Classicism in Eighteenth-Century England* offers a detailed examination of the socio-politics of classical sculpture collecting in eighteenth-century Britain, in the context of shifting ideas about the nature of the English gentleman and his relation to connoisseurship and politics. Author Joan Coutu argues convincingly for the multilayered and important distinctiveness of the mid-century collections she takes as case studies in this book. On the one hand, they were clearly not “identity-driven and philologically based” in the manner of early eighteenth-century collections, nor did they collapse the temporal distance with the classical world as earlier collections did (p. 7). On the other hand, however, they differed markedly from the famous collections assembled by the likes of Charles Townley, Henry Blundell, and William Petty, 2nd Earl of Shelburne, in the later eighteenth century. Those tended to emphasize the authentic original and gathered “objects to be ad-

mired as samples of another time and another place” in contrast to the mid-century collections that Coutu shows to have functioned as *exemplum*, “a visible anchor of the classical erudition of the English patriciate” which was actively intended to encourage public virtue in other men (pp. 7, 6). Various motivated in collecting as each of the study’s four case studies were, *Then and Now* presents each collector—Charles Watson-Wentworth, 2nd Marquis of Rockingham; Charles Lennox, 3rd Duke of Richmond; Francis Hastings, 10th Earl of Huntingdon; and bourgeois Thomas Hollis—engaged in a comparatively dynamic act of restitution “looking back to antiquity yet creating spaces and tropes that were also consciously very much about the present” as they shaped collections often dominated by the casts and copies later eighteenth-century collectors would shun (p. 221). It is with this generation, whose collections articulate changing relations among classical virtue, connoisseurship, and politics in the constitution of the English gentleman, then, that Coutu argues “the apotheosis of the true

English natural aristocrat” occurs (p. 205). Building on Vicky Coltman’s study *Classical Sculpture and the Culture of Collecting in Britain since 1760* (2000), *Then and Now* offers an impressively thorough account of the various ways in which the Grand Manner, of which the collecting of classical sculpture was still a component in the mid-eighteenth century, was negotiated at a time when the concept of gentility was unraveling.

In Coutu’s first case study, we encounter the 2nd Marquis of Rockingham who is shown to have approached the Grand Manner through a process of embedding himself in his country house, enabling him to express his natural aristocratic *virtū* through the sculpture on display within it. In connecting the marquis to the classical realm while at the same time articulating his standing in the contemporary world, the collection “engaged with the classics in a diachronic fashion” to signify the nobility of the collector (p. 91). The 3rd Duke of Richmond, the subject of the second case study, is understood to express his *virtū* similarly through art he gathered in his gallery, but Coutu argues persuasively that Richmond’s collection and the London-based academy he established around it functioned as *exemplum* in a related but clearly distinct way. While Rockingham’s collection and his estate were essentially inseparable, Richmond’s Whitehall gallery actively engaged with a larger public audience, and it was conceived and executed “as a didactic tool to inculcate a classical aesthetic in young British artists” (p. 94). The third case study returns us to the country, specifically to the sanctuary of Donnington Park in Leicestershire to which the 10th Earl of Huntingdon ultimately permanently retreated in 1761 after a turbulent stint as a member of George III’s royal household. Concluding that this “political act of self-removal” signaled Huntingdon’s affinity with the earlier generation of his mentors, from which the other three subjects of *Then and Now* are clearly distinguished, this fourth chapter feels in some ways to be a digression, and one that potentially contradicts the

central argument for the essential points of difference between early and mid-century collectors. In the end, however, it very effectively demonstrates the outmodedness of “retreat” as a political act, thereby bringing Rockingham’s and especially Richmond’s comparatively “grittier” responses to classicism into sharper focus (p. 154). Furthermore, it illuminates the increasing instability of “gentility” as a concept, a notion to which Coutu returns in a fine conclusion when she characterizes Huntingdon as falling victim “to the [effemizing] vices that were hidden in the concept of civic gentility,” a process that essentially annulled his early attempts to embody the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury’s influential ideal of the civic gentleman and prompted his retirement from the public world (p. 219). The fourth and final case study focuses on Thomas Hollis, a far from typical member of the rising bourgeoisie, who possessed “a puritanical aversion to display for himself” coupled with a profound grasp of its power in certain sociopolitical circumstances (p. 192). For Coutu, Hollis was a philanthropist, a man who adopted Whiggism as a moral program and worked behind the scenes to disseminate its ideology. In sharp contrast to Rockingham who was driven to acquire complete sets of classical sculptures, Hollis sought “rare and idiosyncratic” pieces for his collection, which included six paintings commissioned from Canaletto, in order to “aspire to gentlemanly sophistication” and virtue (pp. 174, 219).

Then and Now often strikes the reader as a study that exemplifies the virtues of beauty and grace it explores in the mid-eighteenth-century collections it features. Tightly structured, it moves smoothly from the micro to the macro level, integrating its signature case studies within a larger discussion of the triangulation of politics, collecting, and classicism in eighteenth-century culture. It offers impressively detailed accounts of the genesis, scope, and significance of each of the four individual collections it showcases, each brought to life through rich and plentiful illustration. Dense descriptions of the collections are cleverly bal-

anced with and enlivened by the biographical narratives the book traces and through which Coutu assiduously catalogues each collector's influences, networks, various motivations for collecting, and distinctive strategies for acquirement and preferred means of display and/or dissemination. Characteristically restrained, *Then and Now* resists making any simple connection between the shared political persuasions and masonic connections of its four different subjects and their common drive to assemble significant collections of classical sculpture; however, it is in Coutu's astute consideration of the moments in which each individual collection is "activated politically" within a Whig agenda that the most compelling arguments of this study come into focus (p. 6). Describing an unusual display choice in which Rockingham grouped life-size statues of Venus, Minerva, and Juno he had commissioned from Joseph Nollekens together with a similarly sized statue of Paris he had previously acquired from Lyde Brown, for example, Coutu speculates that this rare "narrative dialogue" might be interpreted allegorically, with George III as Paris making the flawed choice of Venus and threatening thus the decline of empire (p. 84). On a larger scale, chapter 3 charts the evolution of Richmond's unprecedented collection at Whitehall, conceived as a collection to be used by English artists in training, into "the rival organisation" to the Royal Academy through which Richmond mounted a serious, albeit unsurprisingly unsuccessful "patronal challenge to the king" (pp. 121, 123).

Although Coutu presents Huntingdon's collection as fundamentally shaped by his eventual retreat from the political stage, and shows how Hollis negotiated his collection in apolitical terms, *Then and Now* skillfully contextualizes each of the four collections it showcases in relation to eighteenth-century political history, and specifically to the changing fortunes of the Whigs as the century progresses. While the necessary detail in which each collection's evolution and display is described sometimes obscures the larger intellectual

arguments the book grapples with, each case study is tightly framed to counteract this, and substantial introductory and concluding chapters bring the larger and collective aesthetic and political significance of the individual collections into sharper and more energetic focus. In this way, Coutu succeeds both in documenting a hitherto little-examined period of transition in sculptural collecting in Britain and in illuminating the importance of the fabric of classicism in eighteenth-century culture to our understanding of the many nuances of Whiggism. It is clear to see then that *Then and Now* will not merely prove compelling reading for early modern art historians, it will also have broader interdisciplinary appeal.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Alison V. Scott. Review of Coutu, Joan. *Then and Now: Collecting and Classicism in Eighteenth-Century England*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2016.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44988>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.