

Wettlaufer on Freund (2014)

Freund, Amy. *Portraiture and Politics in Revolutionary France*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014. Pp. xvi + 294. ISBN: 978-0-271-06194-8

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Amy Freund's rich and beautifully illustrated study, *Portraiture and Politics in Revolutionary France*, tackles the fascinating collaborative role played by portrait artists and their sitters in the "reimagining of selfhood" (5) and construction of the "citizen" within the context of the new political and social order(s) from the fall of the Bastille to the rise of Napoleon. By tightly focusing on the period 1789–1804, Freund highlights the close correlation between changing régimes—from the Estates-General to the National Assembly, through the Terror, the Directory, and the Consulate—and the visual representation of French subjecthood, identity, and political agency. In a series of case studies, Freund analyzes a handful of images in each of her six chapters and seeks to understand the revolutionary portrait at three levels: "as an expression of an aesthetic system inherited from the ancient régime but shaken to its core by the Revolution, as a product of a new consumer culture, and as an intervention in heated debates about the nature of the self in a new society" (9). Clearly written and cogently argued, *Portraiture and Politics* firmly locates these commissioned paintings within a complex historical context, reading each as an intervention grappling with "the fundamental problem of revolutionary political ideology—how to make new people for the new France" (4).

Chapter one, "Selling Citizenship," examines portraiture in terms of both business transactions and material culture, considering the economic, social, and political implications at play in the changing relationship between consumption and self-representation during the period. Of particular interest here is the idea of "revolutionary transparency," a political theory derived from Rousseau, that privileged "bodily legibility" as a "civic virtue" (17). As Freund explains, artistic manifestations of this personal transparency took two forms: "the illusion of personal intimacy between sitter and viewer, and the meticulous transcription of the surface textures of bodies and objects" (19). Chapter two, "The Legislative Body," tackles the shift in the representation of political agency "from the singular body of the king to the multiple bodies of men whose access to power depended on the votes of their peers," and here Freund reads an unfinished series of print portraits of the deputies to the Estates-General against David's *Serment du Jeu de paume* as alternative responses to new formulations of governance and the issues of "unity and multiplicity, equality and liberty, and the relationship between the representatives and the people" (71) in the new body politic. Moving from the government to the military, chapter three, "*Aux Armes, Citoyens*," looks at portraits of the newly formed National Guard, as members of the Third Estate began to claim positions of military leadership formerly held by the nobility. These intriguing images, performances of patriotic citizenship and changing class structures, illustrate a poignant "revolutionary optimism about the ability of nonelite men to shape the course of national events" (86).

Following a brief section on the Terror, Freund continues her discussion of portraits as "political arguments" (123) in a compelling chapter on gender, representation, and political agency in "The *Citoyenne* Tallien in Prison." Focusing on Jean-Louis Laneuville's 1796 portrait of Thérèse Cabarrus, an advocate for women's place in the civic order, Freund presents a thought-provoking account of the political and social aspirations of "one of the public faces of the Revolution" (132), imprisoned for her involvement with Jean-Lambert Tallien, a leader of the Thermidorian reaction. When Tallien led the overthrow of Robespierre to save his lover from the guillotine, Cabarrus became known as "Notre Dame de Thermidor" and was later one of the most visible of the *merveilleuses*. An artist in her own right (Cabarrus executed portraits of her guards in prison), she was an active participant in the composition of this portrait, but as Freund observes, "her attempt to create a feminine version of political agency through portraiture was by and large a failure." Nonetheless, it "provides us with an insight into the unfulfilled promises of revolutionary citizenship" (129). The final two chapters turn to Gérard's full-length portrait of the president of the *Directoire*, Louis-Marie Révellière-Lépeaux ("The National *Elysée*") and to family portraiture ("Duty and Happiness"), while a brief conclusion touches on David's massive group portrait of Napoleon's 1804 coronation and the end of "portraiture's direct engagement with politics" (243). Emphasizing the close rapport between historical events and aesthetics, *Portraiture and Politics in Revolutionary France* does an admirable job grounding these myriad paintings within a cultural matrix. More theoretical consideration of portraiture *per se* would have been welcome (even the bibliography seems to be missing important texts in the field), but Amy Freund's study remains a fine addition to scholarship on French art during the Revolutionary period and a revealing exploration of a largely ignored genre.

Volume: 43.3-4

Year:

- 2015