

## Challenging the myth of Pierre-Jean Mariette (1694-1774)

Valérie Kobi, *Dans l'oeil du connaisseur. Pierre-Jean Mariette (1694-1774) et la construction des savoirs en histoire de l'art*, Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes 2017, 322 pp., Illustrations : Couleurs et N & B. 28,00 €. ISBN : 978-2-7535-5314-9

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It is a little provoking to start a book about one of the most prolific connoisseurs in art history with several failures. Kobi opens her account on Pierre-Jean Mariette (1694-1774) with the *Recueil de Testes de caractères et de charges* (1730) in which he published a letter about Leonardo da Vinci and which further entailed a series of reproductive prints by the Comte de Caylus after caricature drawings by the artist. The book became an important work of reference among art scholars in the eighteenth century; however, only four years after his death it was discovered that the drawings were copies. Also the carved gem, the so-called 'cachet', of Michelangelo and the drawing of a hand by Michelangelo were later on rejected. With these examples Kobi raises questions about the ways in which Mariette realized his publications and what they entailed from a scientific point of view.

*Dans l'oeil du connaisseur* is exclusively concerned with the art publications of Mariette. Although several important studies have been devoted to his written work in recent times, such as Haskell's, Griener and Hurley's and Smentek's, Kobi provides widely valuable insights into the emergence of art-historical knowledge, the circumstances under which it came about and its different formats.<sup>1</sup> However, her book does not entail a complete revision of Mariette's scientific position, as she does not integrate the collections he assembled and consulted in her analysis. Such an inclusion is essential as Mariette's scholarship was primarily rooted in the observation and assessment of art works in collections. It is greatly stimulating that Kobi challenges the mythic proportions that have been accorded to Mariette's connoisseurship in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>2</sup> Yet, ultimately she does not discharge the myth of the connoisseur-collector, she replaces it with the image of the connoisseur-scholar.

The publications by Mariette form a rich and diverse, but coherent corpus. They comprise published letters, such as those in Bottari's *Raccolta di Lettere* (1757-73), and (commented) auction catalogues, such as the influential *Description sommaire des desseins des grands maîtres d'Italie, des Pays-Bas et de France du cabinet de feu M. Crozat* (1741). The genre of the 'receuil', which Kobi further highlights, was often a group effort in which Mariette took up the role of the author of the texts, such as the notorious *Recueil d'estampes d'après les plus beaux tableaux et d'après les plus beaux desseins qui sont en France* (1729-42), which is better

<sup>1</sup> Francis Haskell, *The Painful Birth of the Art Book*, London: Thames and Hudson 1987; Pascal Griener and Cecilia Hurley, 'A Matter of Reflection in the Era of Virtual Imaging: Caylus and Mariette's *Recueil de Testes de Caractère & Charges*, dessinées par Léonard de Vinci (1730)', in: Albrecht Juerg (ed), *Horizonte: Beiträge zur Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft: 50 Jahre Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft*, Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz Verlag 2001, 337-344; Kristel Smentek, *Mariette and the Science of the Connoisseur in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, Farnham/ Burlington: Ashgate 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Kobi 2017, 13, 41, and chapter 'Destinée historiographiques'.

known as the *Recueil Crozat* (1729-42). Lastly, treatises and monographs are discussed such as the essential *Traité des pierres gravées* (1750), and the little known *Description des travaux qui ont précédé, accompagné et suivi la fonte en bronze d'un seul jet de la Statue Équestre de Louis XV* (1768) which was devoted to Bouchardon's sculpture of Louis XV. In view of this material it is a pity that the opportunity has been missed to publish a complete list of Mariette's written works.<sup>3</sup>

Far from giving a bare overview of the publications by Mariette Kobi aims to place Mariette's work in a 'scientific practice', through which the book became a 'laboratory of knowledge' and a 'privileged space' for debate among amateurs with which they contributed to the 'formation of empirical knowledge in the field of art history'.<sup>4</sup> She does so by developing two vital perspectives on case studies from Mariette's written work. The first analyses the social-cultural context in which Mariette emerged as a connoisseur, in which his wide network and ideological issues play an important role. The second perspective explores the various manifestations of Mariette's scientific work, through a discussion of theoretical models and visual representations used. Both perspectives are governed by a critical approach to his social-cultural behaviour and his published works, which supports the deconstruction of the myth of Mariette as a connoisseur of art. What's more, for much of her assessment she relies not only on documents relating directly to Mariette such as letters, archival sources and publications, but also on a range of recent theoretical notions adopted from Norbert Elias, Bruno Latour, Michel Foucault and others.

The first part of Kobi's book is largely devoted to the social-cultural context of the emergence of Mariette as a connoisseur, but attention is also paid to his scientific formation. She firstly focuses exclusively on the well-known trip the young Mariette made from Brussels to Vienna and Naples between 1717 and 1719 on the occasion of the acquisition of a print collection by Prince Eugen from the Mariettes. She hereby passes over the training provided by his father in the print business and the education he received as a book seller and publisher (*libraire-éditeur*), the last of which however must have increased his facility in publishing his own work in particular. Kobi argues convincingly – more than Smentek already did recently – that Mariette's connoisseurship not only presupposed a judicious eye but also the control of social manners, which was part of the cult of the '*honnête homme*'.<sup>5</sup> According to her Mariette's was not a grand tour in the aristocratic sense nor a trip purely made for commercial reasons. It taught him the manners of the nobility and to use them professionally in business. This combination reveals a bourgeois understanding of the '*honnête homme*', which was new in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Secondly, she focuses on the scientific aspects of the same tour. By perusing the travel account of Mariette she shows how the direct confrontation with the art works – cataloguing Eugen's print collection and viewing paintings in Italy – shaped his eye and thus his visual independence from reproductive prints and previous aesthetic opinion such as Roger de Piles's. Thus, Kobi regards Mariette's tour as a '*rite-de-passage*', which would give him access after his return to the elite circles of Pierre Crozat.

Kobi concludes the first part of her book with a chapter in which she concentrates on the social-cultural aspects of scientific collaboration underlying many of Mariette's written

<sup>3</sup> In the bibliography a substantial list of Mariette's works is published, but it does not comprise the *Receuil d'estampes* (1729-42) (under Caylus) or the *Raccolta di Lettere* (under Bottari) for example.

<sup>4</sup> Kobi 2017, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Kobi 2017, 61, 63.

works. This collaboration took place in a Western-European network of specialists in the visual arts extending from Giovanni Bottari (1689-1775) in Italy to Karl Heinrich von Heineken (1707-1791) in Germany, Gerard Meerman (1722-1771) in the Netherlands and to Horace Walpole (1717-1797) in England. In a discussion of the essential *Traité des pierres gravées* (1750) she assesses the scientific method Mariette applied as original. However, the originality of this method must have been relative because rather than forcing a break Kobi indicates that it took part in a gradual movement away from the Vasarian approach to artists and their works in biographies, and a refinement of De Piles's method of combining the history of artists with the history of the arts through a comparative analysis of the individual styles of artists.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, she demonstrates that Mariette not only based his investigation on the collection and the library in his cabinet, but also on information obtained through correspondence. The 'effectiveness' of his wide network can be deduced from the epistolary exchanges entailing information, transcriptions, art works, books and sources and so on. In a critical case study about an anonymous painting of *Amor Cutting a Bow*, whose attribution to Parmigianino by Mariette is still accepted today, Kobi interestingly characterizes the scientific exchange through correspondence as a kind of transactional economy. Mariette disclosed knowledge for his correspondents (lives of Vasari, painting for comparison), as well as concealed knowledge for correspondents who thus had to rely on the vagueness of his authority (drawings in his collection).

The second part of the book highlights the different manifestations of Mariette's scholarly publications. Here the first and the third chapter stand out. Building on the work of Pomian, Kobi discusses how he developed two distinctive editorial formats out of his work on the organisation of the print collection of Prince Eugen.<sup>7</sup> They are the annotated catalogue and the (illustrated) *recueil*, such as the *Description sommaire* (1741) of Crozat's drawing collection and the *Recueil de Testes* (1730).<sup>8</sup> Both formats take part in a fascinating process of knowledge creation from collection to art book. This firstly entails the phase of creating a 'structural pattern' – that of artists' oeuvres arranged chronologically according to (national) schools – by which means visual objects can be understood. Kobi indicates that in the history of print collecting - developing from Quiccheberg and Marolles to Durazzo – Mariette favoured the arrangement according to oeuvre with a view to facilitating stylistic comparison and thus art connoisseurship.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, she convincingly argues that Mariette recognized the 'theoretical power of this system' for scholarly discourse about art by applying it to the auction catalogue in which he added comments about artistic styles. Thirdly, this system was applied to the *receuil*, which combined biographical and stylistic texts with reproductive prints, and thereby imitated the possibility of study in a cabinet. Interestingly, she concludes that Mariette lacked originality in the application of the structure in comparison with his predecessors such as De Piles. Nevertheless, his opinion about art differs radically from them; he defended a classical appreciation of art. The second chapter concentrates on the visual material in Mariette's work – his search for truthful reproductive prints, their relationship to texts, as well as his opinion that they ultimately

<sup>6</sup> Kobi 2017, 98-99.

<sup>7</sup> Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux: Paris, Venise: XVIe-XVIIIe siècle*, Paris: Gallimard 1987.

<sup>8</sup> Kobi indicates that taken together they comprise more than 70% of the literary production with which Mariette established his reputation in Europe. Kobi 2017, 136.

<sup>9</sup> Mariette suppressed the arrangement according to theme by incorporating it into oeuvres.

cannot capture artistic genius –, with a noteworthy case study about the ‘cachet’ of Michelangelo which was reproduced in the *Traité* (1750).

The third and last chapter of the second part is noteworthy for Kobi’s discussion of Mariette’s outstanding connoisseurship as a strategy in his publications to claim authority and promote a classical artistic ideal through the exemplary work of the sculptor Bouchardon. For her analysis of the understudied texts of Mariette on Bouchardon she departs from the notion of the ‘union of talents’ (Watelet) in the (often troubled) relationships between amateurs and artists. This relationship was vital in the creation of the myth of Bouchardon as well as in the further establishment of Mariette as a connoisseur of art. The image of the sculptor was built on the lifelikeness of his classicizing statues. He was pushed forward as the ambassador of a simple and noble art by a circle of amateurs, including Caylus and Mariette, who believed contemporary art was decadent. Yet, Bouchardon became the subject of a battle of authority between the amateur Caylus and the philosopher Diderot, who believed the artist in fact turned against the advice of amateurs to study antiquity and also pointed at the imperfections in his works.<sup>10</sup> The critique of Diderot and others of Bouchardon was effectively diminished by Mariette. As a result of a profound friendship between the connoisseur and the artist, which is characterized by an alliance rather than a tutorship, Mariette exercised a form of what Kobi calls ‘empirical psychology’. In it he closely tied a detailed description of the artist’s works and its sensations to a revelation of the difficulties, choices and motives of the artist. Thus, Mariette employed his perception as a *connoisseur* as a new strategy to focus on artworks rather than on the artist, with which he created an ‘effect of truth’, and thus claimed authority. Also in the case study devoted to the remarkable *Description des travaux* (1768) – centring on the sculpture of Louis XV by Bouchardon – a similar strategy is followed by Mariette, but now further elaborated by the inclusion of an extensive technical discussion and a rich visual apparatus explaining the making process of the sculpture.

At several prominent instances in the book Mariette’s method of connoisseurship is presented as providing the key to the originality of his art scholarship. This method of connoisseurship entails an empirical approach to art, by which means the visual analysis of the artwork dominates a historical or aesthetic discourse of art. Yet, Kobi’s book seems to lay a partial basis for the claim of this originality. Indeed, important indicators for the acknowledgement of his outstanding position are the effectiveness of his Western-European network, his prominent memberships of academies as well as his extraordinary social ascension. However, his originality should also appear from a comparison with the work of contemporary scholars who like him adopted connoisseurship. As indicated above Kobi implies that Mariette was part of a process whereby the Vasarian model of art history was decreasing in prominence since the second half of the seventeenth century, and the empirical approach of connoisseurship was gradually increasing. Apparently his originality does not imply a break, but should be regarded as part of a long-lasting development. An important predecessor in this respect is Roger de Piles, and elsewhere she refers to contemporaries such as Giovanni Bottari, the Comte de Caylus, Jonathan Richardson and Johann Joachim Winckelmann, but it is also possible to think of Baldinucci or d’Argenville. This raises questions about the relative extent of the originality of Mariette’s connoisseurship in the larger development of the field of art history in the eighteenth century.

<sup>10</sup> Kobi 2017, 203.

As a result of the choice to analyse the art historiography of Mariette, Kobi does not discuss the collections which determined his scholarship to such a large degree. She discusses collections only in so far they are disclosed in catalogues. The question is to what extent this results in an incomplete image of the scientific merits of Mariette's work. Even if his cabinet – including his print and drawing collections and library – has dispersed, a consideration of the known material would be valuable. The process of art-historical knowledge creation, in which connoisseurship played such a central role, asks for an integrated analysis which takes both collecting and historiography into account. This could entail for example a discussion of the (different media of the) art works in the collection, the way art works were arranged, stored and/or displayed, the means by which they were viewed and understood, and the exchanges between collecting and historiography at possible various stages of knowledge creation. Such an analysis may also avert the danger that two distinct images are created, that of the connoisseur-collector and that of the connoisseur-scholar, which however are united in the connoisseurship that Mariette represented.

Kobi indeed re-evaluates the role of Mariette in eighteenth-century art history by focusing only on the art publications and not on the collections owned or compiled by Mariette. She makes a valuable contribution to the knowledge about the social-cultural dimensions of his work – entailing the cult of the '*honnête homme*' and the international scientific collaborations. About the scientific dimensions of his work she sheds light in particular on the process of knowledge creation from collection to several forms of publication, and on the ideologies that motivate scholarly production. Also several detailed case studies, such as those devoted to the carved gem of Michelangelo and the Bouchardon publications are valuable. Connoisseurship is hereby defined not only as the expression of refined artistic taste, but emphatically also as the instrument of scientific scrutiny. In this respect Kobi potentially contributes to the deconstruction of the myth of Mariette. Although this will not diminish the image of Mariette as a connoisseur, yet, it does change the understanding of his connoisseurship.

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