

Book Review

Frédéric Bußmann, *Sammeln als Strategie. Die Kunstsammlungen des Prince de Conti im Paris des ausgehenden Ancien Régime*. Berlin, Gebr. Mann Verlag, 2010. ISBN 978-3-7861-2604-1. 488 pp., 153 b. & w. illus., 16 col. illus. €89.

Louis-François de Bourbon, Prince de Conti (1717–76), is well known as one of the most important collectors in Paris during the second half of the eighteenth century. The dispersal of the collection in 1777 and 1779 was widely regarded as a crucial event for the Parisian art market. Today, a Conti provenance is still seen as a letter of nobility for paintings. Surprisingly, the first in-depth study of the collection has only recently appeared. Frédéric Bußmann has written a reliable monograph on the Prince and the fullest account of his patronage and collecting to date. Given the central importance of Conti for the history of French eighteenth-century collecting, Bußmann's book fills an important gap.

Bußmann carefully analyses Conti's position in contemporary French politics. The first part of the book provides a useful critical summary of Conti's political activities and his position in relation to the royal court. As a young man, he was close to Louis XV and assumed an influential position. After long periods of tension with the King, Conti gradually withdrew from court when the Seven Years' War began. He had been an outspoken critic of the *Renversement des alliances*. His strong position in the parliaments had become his power-base and came, as so often, with Jansenist leanings. His support of the Parliament when it was exiled from Paris gave him the reputation of a defender of old liberties.

In 1748, while Conti was still enjoying the King's favour, he had been nominated the new Grand Prior of the Order of Malta in France. The second part of Bußmann's book explores the fascinating story of the Grand Priory of the Hospitallers in France, the Temple compound in the Marais. The Prince moved his main residence there only after his relationship with the King had effectively ended. His new abode provided protection through its exempt legal status

and was ideally located in the heart of the Marais with its strong tradition of aristocratic opposition. Conti's life was then mainly divided between the Temple and his country estate at Isle-Adam. The Temple compound made it easier for Conti to protect intellectuals like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Beaumarchais who were effectively out of reach of the police and royal power. The Prince had the *palais* of the Prior modestly refurbished. It became primarily a stage for music, theatre and social gatherings and for his collection, but not a strong architectural statement in its own right. Slightly more is known about its decoration than Bußmann acknowledges: Nattier's and Raoux's decorative paintings have been identified and studied in the catalogues for the Nattier exhibition of 1999–2000 at the Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon and the Raoux exhibition of 2009–10 at the Musée Fabre, Montpellier.

The third and most substantial part of the book discusses Conti's collection. Before the 1750s, the Prince showed no signs of a serious interest in the arts and sciences – as seemed to be the norm in the Conti family. Neither had the previous priors at the Temple built up important collections. At the turning point in his political career, Conti chose collecting as a medium to demonstrate his own important lineage and his claim to power at a time when his political position had become more marginal. Bußmann argues convincingly that competition with the rival house of Orléans would have provided the main incentive. Conti's collections of sculptures and drawings, botany, geography and clocks are discussed, but Bußmann puts the emphasis on the paintings. He stresses, however, that these different types of objects have to be seen together in order to understand Conti's ambitions. Bußmann's book gives important insights into Conti's sources and his financial situation. While his discussion of Conti's dealers often does not venture beyond the well known, important new information about the collection is provided. Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun wrote a fascinating memorandum about the scope and system of a future collection for the Prince (published in an appendix), probably to launch himself as the

collection's keeper. Bußmann also traces the history of the dispersal of the collection and the two gigantic sales which by contemporaries were considered a financial failure, due largely to their close proximity to the equally exceptional Blondel de Gagny and Randon de Boisset sales which had absorbed buying power.

The book culminates in a discussion and reconstruction of Conti's collection of paintings: 233 paintings as well as sixty-eight works on paper and five sculptures are included in the appendix. This forms a useful tool for a better understanding of the collection, even if it represents only a work in progress. The author has started a website to collect further information (<http://conti-collection.de>). Bußmann seems less comfortable in his interpretation of contemporary collecting and in his judgement of the collection's importance. Central questions like the relative position of Dutch paintings in the collection or the function of copies and attributions are treated within oversimplified parameters.

The book is not always pleasant to read. Occasionally one might have wished for less fashionable art historical jargon. Similarly distracting is Bußmann's decision to give paintings titles in the different languages of the country in which they happen to be today. Judgements from nineteenth- and twentieth-century

scholars are extensively quoted and not always clearly distinguished from primary sources. But this scarcely diminishes the value of the book.

Bußmann's monograph is a thoroughly researched study with a wide horizon covering many different areas of Conti's patronage, collecting and political position. Its greatest strength lies in its extensive use of sources – many of them hardly known or unpublished – and a perceptive discussion of the links between Conti's collecting activities and his specific political and social position as a protagonist of a conservative opposition and as a member of one of the highest-ranking families of the French aristocracy. Bußmann also presents important evidence on the (usually desperate) financial situation of the Prince. Bußmann's main theses concerning Conti's collecting and patronage seem convincing and well founded. The title's claim that Conti's collecting formed a fully fledged 'strategy' might push the evidence too far, but the main body of the book is sufficiently cautious in its claims. The book includes an impressive and useful bibliography. The comprehensive appendix of source material is a true mine of information and will facilitate further research.

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