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978-0-521-11502-5 - The Object of Art: The Theory of Illusion in Eighteenth-Century France

Marian Hobson

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**THE OBJECT OF ART**  
**THE THEORY OF ILLUSION**  
**IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE**

*MARIAN HOBSON*

*Fellow of Trinity College,  
Cambridge*

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## GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

This series aims at providing a new forum for the discussion of major critical or scholarly topics within the field of French studies. It differs from most similar-seeming ventures in the degree of freedom which contributing authors are allowed and in the range of subjects covered. For the series is not concerned to promote any single area of academic specialisation or any single theoretical approach. Authors are invited to address themselves to *problems*, and to argue their solutions in whatever terms seem best able to produce an incisive and cogent account of the matter in hand. The search for such terms will sometimes involve the crossing of boundaries between familiar academic disciplines, or the calling of those boundaries into dispute. Most of the studies will be written especially for the series, although from time to time it will also provide new editions of outstanding works which were previously out of print, or originally published in languages other than English or French.

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## FOREWORD

This book is not a survey of eighteenth-century aesthetics. That has been done, recently and excellently, by J. Chouillet, in *l'Esthétique des Lumières* (1974). Nor, while taking as its subject eighteenth-century theories of illusion, does it aim to present a slice of the history of European man's perception of art. Rather, it attempts to describe a historical change in the way of *conceiving* man's perception of art. That these two histories cannot be identical is evident, though they cannot be separated. For man's perception of art is in the main a praxis: its study must go through psychology, through economics (the art market), anthropology (the place society gives to art), architecture (where pictures are placed, where concerts are heard), etc. But our conception of that perception, in that it is necessarily linguistic, is necessarily, even if unwittingly or unwillingly, theoretical. It embodies – because language embodies – epistemological and cultural assumptions. This is true even of our conception of those arts which are non-linguistic. It is possible to comment on a piece of music by interpreting it, on a drawing by pastiching it; but is not this, even if accompanied by speech, to draw back the work into the orbit of perception, rather than to tie it into (perhaps to tie it up in?) the world of conceptions? This book studies primarily the language of critics, indeed it began as a historical account of one word, 'illusion'. But perception and conception of the perception of art are necessarily intertwined – and the first must be used in the interpretation of the second. To speak baldly, it is best to know what the critics are talking about. The work of art, on the other hand, *calls for* certain kinds of perception, and not others (the term is that of the great art critic Roger de Piles, 'ap-peler'); it directs us, and changes our conceptions. These in turn, no doubt, change the mode of perception.

I have attempted to exhibit a historical change, mostly within the area of French theories of art in the eighteenth century. This calls for three methodological remarks:

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This change in conceptions of art is at the same time radical and prepared. The continuous displacement that is culture moves along lines of tension that go back to Antiquity, and it is from within the present situation of these lines of tension that we approach it.

History is not the same as chronology. Certain later writers are, in my perspective, erratic blocks, and illustrate perfectly earlier tendencies. This is unsurprising (there exists in Great Britain in 1980 a Flat Earth Society). That history may proceed by jumps and overlaps does not need defending in general; discussion must centre on the interpretation of individual instances. Out of similar considerations, I have used on occasion two German writers, Lessing and Herder, not for the (considerable) weight of their own merits, but because they illuminate with special clarity tendencies present less sharply in French writers. In the case of Lessing, who is continuing and criticising the work of Diderot, this is conscious.

I haven't – could anyone – exhausted the sources in the most basic sense of locating and reading them. But to have attempted such a method would have suffered from a defect worse even than near-impossibility. It would have assumed its domain and its objects. In history, it is the light thrown on objects which makes them visible. It is then that the objects can reveal that the light is coming from the wrong or right angle.

The debts contracted are many and many are acknowledged in the notes. I have, for example, followed the practice of attributing passages and quotations to the twentieth-century critics who first showed their value and interest, in spite of the fact that in almost all cases I have read the original text.

Here, in this foreword, I have personal debts to acknowledge: to Ralph Leigh, in particular, for what was not just the supervision of my thesis – demanding, sometimes frightening, always friendly – but an education in discrimination and scholarship. Although, as their 'assistante', I was supposed to 'assist' them, Jean Starobinski and George Steiner taught me much by their example as well as by their advice. Without the generosity and patience of Malcolm Bowie, the editor of this series, the manuscript could never have been made ready (as it was, it nearly wasn't). I owe gratitude to Geoff Bennington, for the encouragement and criticism which saw me through bad days; to Simon Harvey who helped check some references; and to Ann and



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Martin Wolfe, for great and constant kindness. Most of all I owe to a man who does not prate about women's lib, but practises it: the book is dedicated to him.