

Columbia University Libraries Research Award: 2014-2015

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Project: *The architecture of eighteenth-century rocaille ornamental engravings*

Collections: Avery; original books of ornament and plates of François de Cuvilliés, Jacques de Lajoue, Jean Mondon le fils, Franz Xaver Habermann, and Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier.

Research Report: August, 2015

My research trips regarding the architecture of eighteenth-century rocaille ornamental engravings at Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library were conducted during September-October, 2014 and April-May, 2015. The thesis engaged one principal area regarding these engravings: the role of rocaille ornament and the meaning of its fusion with architecture. The proposal focused on five artists whose original books of ornament and plates are held in Avery Library and who speak effectively to the concerns raised in the body of the study: François de Cuvilliés, Jacques de la Joue, Jean Mondon le fils, Franz Xaver Habermann, and Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier. A key overall question guided the exploration. If architecture merges with ornament, as it does in these engravings, to what extent can that ornament still speak eloquently, given ornament's rhetorical foundations?

*Delicieux jardins, agréable verdure,  
Beaux parterres que Flore enrichit de ses dons,  
D'un livre ingénieux souvent sur vos gazons  
Ou se plaît à goûter l'amusante lecture.*

*Plus vif dans mes plaisirs, pour moy j'aime bien mieux  
Accompagner Philis, et lire dans ses yeux  
Qu'au fond de vos bosquets un solitaire azile,  
A nos tendres ardeurs deviendrait fort utile.*

Poem from Jean Mondon le fils, *Le Temps-de L'Après-Dinée (Les Heures du Jour)*,  
ca.1738

An initial glance at a Jean Mondon le fils architectural engraving or associated poem and one might envision a world of leisure, delicacy, and endless garden promenades. Dawn rendezvous, midday joys, and after-dinner pleasures give way to evening charms. Having examined Mondon's series of the four times of day, curator Charissa Bremer-David suggests that the works primarily illustrate a gallant and elite life and that they demonstrate the move away from emblems of allegories to *gravures de mode*.<sup>1</sup> She is right to stress the role of fashionable dress and behavior on the works. Yet the symbolical and metaphorical significance of Mondon's ornamental engravings had not yet disappeared and can still give us fundamental clues as to the meaning of rocaille. The profoundly abstract and nature-mimicking architecture in his depictions cannot be left behind as mere rococo scenery.

The term rocaille had been used since the seventeenth century to describe rock and shellwork commonly found in grottos and fountains. With respect to ornament, the word was first used in 1734 to describe the work of Meissonnier.<sup>2</sup> Yet as part of a title to a series of architectural drawings, it first appeared, to my knowledge, in the 1736 *Premier Livre de formes Cartels et Rocailles Ornés de Figures de Modes*. With the word rococo still being more than a century away from being used in dictionaries to define the work of this period, rocaille remained at the heart of any understanding of the architecture of the time.<sup>3</sup>

Despite his general obscurity, Mondon provided one of the earliest French examples of architectural rocaille work, and I would argue, the most radically abstracted architecture of any of his Paris-based contemporaries. In the engravings of Meissonnier and de le Joue, one dreams along with the artists and imagines inhabiting the fantastical spatial settings provided. With

Mondon, however, a more raw abstraction indelibly haunts the amorous scenes depicted and allows us to envision an underlying tension in the rococo, one described by Hans Sedlmayr as a “cooling in the vital warmth of architecture.”<sup>4</sup>

This abstraction, very familiar to contemporary eyes, suggests a dissolution of architecture into natural forms and into the decorative world of rocaille. It is precisely this historically novel ability of architecture to blend so comprehensively both into ornament and into nature that I was able to investigate in the rocaille engravings at Avery. Some primary texts for study were:

de Cuvilliés, François. *Oeuvres de Cuvilliés*.

\_\_\_\_. *A collection of engravings after the designs of François de Cuvilliés, the elder and his son, François the younger (1731-1777)*.

\_\_\_\_. *Morceaux de caprices a divers usages*.

de la Joue, Jacques. *Livre nouveau de douze morceaux de fantaisie*.

Habermann, Franz Xaver. *Rococo Ornamente*.

\_\_\_\_. *Recueil de motifs et compositions rocailles*.

Meissonnier, Juste Aurèle. *Oeuvre de Juste Aurel Meissonnier, peintre, sculpteur, architecte ...*

Mondon le fils, Jean. *Oeuvre de Jean Mondon (le fils)*.

Through an examination of specific instances of rocaille’s fusion with architecture within the eighteenth-century books of ornament within the Columbia Library collections, this project questioned the commonly held definition of mid-eighteenth-century rocaille as purely a joyous, delicate, and elegant ornamental motif. As a result of this study, I came to a greater understanding of why this ornament was emancipating itself from its long-standing moral and rhetorical foundations by blending itself into the architecture that it once served.

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<sup>1</sup> Charissa Bremer-David, “The Hours of the Day,” in *Paris: Life and Luxury in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Charissa Bremer-David (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011), 27.

<sup>2</sup> From an advertisement in *Mercure de France* (March, 1734).

<sup>3</sup> Hermann Bauer, whose 1955 Ph.D. thesis remains to this day the primary inquiry into the subject, refers to rocaille as the “critical form” of the rococo. See his *Rocaille: Zur Herkunft und zum Wesen eines Ornament-Motivs* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1962).

<sup>4</sup> See his discussion in *Art in Crisis: The Lost Centre* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1957), 197-198.