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Hyacinthe Rigaud's portrait of Gaspard de Gueidan. Art and aristocratic politics during the Ancien Regime

Article. Source : actes de colloque

Kohle, Hubertus, "Hyacinthe Rigaud's portrait of Gaspard de Gueidan. Art and aristocratic politics during the Ancien Regime", dans Leonhard, Jörn (éd.), What makes nobility noble ? Comparative perspectives from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, Göttingen, 2011, p. 279-298.

Extrait de l'article

" The portraitist has no trouble keeping food on his table ; that is to say that there is not one wealthy bourgeois not being coquettish enough to want to own a portrait of herself." What this witty observer of the contemporary French art scene in 1728 ironically attacks here reflects the ambivalent position of portraiture in the eighteenth century. Quantitatively meaningful, it nevertheless occupied only a middling position in the academic hierarchy of genres. Particularly with the attempts of the incipient neoclassical style to leave the subjects of the time behind (which were considered frivolous) did the number of people grow who accused portraiture of enjoying an undue boost in popularity, especially compared to history painting. The public administration of art felt compelled to compensate for the private penchant by officially limiting its promotion. Ultimately, however, this had little effect. The rift between normative art-theoretical parameters and the needs of consumers grew larger and larger. In the nineteenth century, the salons were decked out with with more or less meaningless portraits, while criticism of the genre rose ad nauseam. Towards the middle of the century, the production of photorealistic portraits reached industrial proportions.

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