

**Gérard Sabatier, Versailles ou la disgrâce d'Apollon, Rennes (Presses universitaires de Rennes) 2016, 360 p., 66 fig. en n/b, 17 pl. en coul. (Histoire. Aulica. L'Univers de la cour), ISBN 978-2-7535-5195-4, EUR 24,00.**

Frühe Neuzeit – Revolution – Empire  
(1500–1815)

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Every scholar who works on cultural history in the era of Louis XIV and more precisely on Versailles knows the work of Gérard Sabatier. His first book »Versailles ou la figure du Roi« which appeared in 1999 already presented an analysis of the iconography of the palace. In 2015 he co-curated an exhibition with Béatrix Saule to mark the tricentenary of Louis XIV's death »Le roi est mort. Louis XIV. 1715« and in between he published such works as »Les monarchies de France et d'Espagne, 1556–1715. Rituels et pratiques« with Sylvène Édouard (2001), »Le prince et les arts: Stratégies figuratives de la monarchie française de la Renaissance à l'âge baroque« (2010), »Louis XIV espagnol? Madrid et Versailles, images et modèles« (with Margarita Torrione, 2009), Sylvène Édouard. »Les jésuites et le monde des images« (2009) and the great three-volume series with Juliusz A. Chrościcki and Mark Hengerer on princely funerals: »Les funérailles princières en Europe, XVI<sup>e</sup>–XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle« (2012, [2013](#) and 2015). In addition, he is the President of the Research Board of the Centre de recherche du château de Versailles. This monograph, therefore, is the work of a real expert, pulling together the threads of a lifetime's research into the subject he is discussing.

The aim of the book is to challenge the notion of Versailles as the Palace of the Sun, marketed as such today to its thousands of visitors. Sabatier wants us to see how Versailles developed over the period of its construction and of its role as the seat of government. As the title of the book already makes plain, he sees that development as a negative one in its abandonment of an originally noble iconographic programme. This is how he puts it in his summing up at the end of the book: »Appauvrissement d'un univers vidé du foisonnement des dieux pour se réduire au seul prince qui le remplit tout entier« (p. 313).

To demonstrate his thesis, Sabatier takes us on a tour of the palace and its development, room by room, painting by painting. He begins with the transformation of the original hunting lodge into »Le palais du Soleil« (chapter I), discussing the way in which the myth of Apollo was deployed in the fountains and statues at the beginning of the reign of Louis XIV. He then goes on to show in chapter II (»Les appartements, ou les vertus du roi«), how the king's apartments, structured according to the planets, have to be decoded as a portrait of the king as »la somme des héros antiques« (p. 61). He then goes on in Chapter III to analyse the iconographic programme of the staircase known as »l'escalier des Ambassadeurs« and in chapters IV, V and VI that of the galerie des Glaces. These spaces present Louis as the hero who has come to dominate the whole of Europe and are, says Sabatier, executed in an Italianate Baroque style and their laudatory imagery, created during the first twenty years of Louis's reign, has to be deciphered. In a fascinating chapter VI entitled »Politique de la galerie«, he does the deciphering for us, showing how the décor of the space presents on the one hand a new European order and on the other a new political system, that of absolutism.

In chapter VII (»Louis-Auguste«), chapter VIII (»Publier la puissance de Louis«) and chapter IX (»Pour le Plaisir du public«) Sabatier goes on to show



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how, in the thirty-five years in which Versailles was the seat of the French government, the iconography changed from lauding the hero according to an Italianate model to presenting power through an imperial and classical model. Sabatier clearly hates this development. He already nails his colours to the mast on the back cover of the book:

»La délicatesse de l'art le cède à l'expression de la puissance. Cela passe par le primat de l'architecture, une boulimie cumulative transformant les jardins en musée de la sculpture antique, la promotion des performances techniques où l'hydraulique somptuaire tient désormais la première place. La disgrâce d'Apollon ne se constate pas seulement dans les phases successives de l'histoire du lieu, mais dans son fonctionnement, c'est-à-dire dans l'usage qui en a été fait, les prescriptions édictées à destination des visiteurs, le ressenti dont ont témoigné les hôtes.«

Sabatier sees in this the paradox that Versailles on the one hand plays a central role in the construction of the French monarchy and on the other that it contains within its iconographic programme the seeds of the crisis of absolutism that brought that monarchy to an end (p. 315).

This book, beautifully illustrated in both black-and-white and colour, is never less than interesting and challenging. Its overwhelming wealth of details means, however, that it should ideally be read while traversing the palace and the gardens of Versailles. Only in this way can a reader do justice to the knowledge of the palace and the command of sources that Sabatier displays. Only in this way can we decide if we agree with Sabatier's critique of this iconic building or not.

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