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Women on Top of Arts and Politics

Rosalind Savill (†)

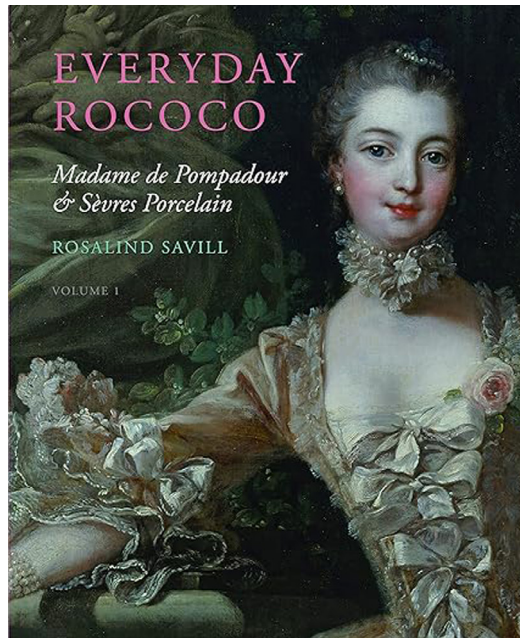
**Everyday Rococo. Madame de Pompadour & Sèvres
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What woman played a key role in arts policy under the French monarchy better than the Marquise de Pompadour? Certainly, Catherine and Marie de Médicis distinguished themselves as patrons, sponsors and lovers of the arts in the fields of architecture, painting, decor and theater, as did Anne of Austria, and later on, Marie Leszczyńska and Marie-Antoinette. However, their status as queens or regents in title almost automatically assigned them to this role, while Madame de Pompadour took on and instituted in her own measure a particular function as promoter of the arts. Of course, other royal mistresses, such as Diane de Poitiers under Henry II, Madame de Montespan under Louis XIV and Madame du Barry in the final years of Louis XV's reign, also shaped the arts in their day in a substantial way, but the Marquise de Pompadour's actions were unique in their scope.

Sfortuna and fortuna critica

She occupied a special position in the French monarchy between 1745, when she was presented to the sovereign, and 1764, when she died at just 42 years of age. Madame de Pompadour carved out a place for herself at the heart of the court system, integrating herself into the court of Versailles, enjoying the privilege of private apartments at the château, but also in the state apparatus, holding a position as the king's consort. Because she had a front-row seat to the exercise of power, her adulterous relationship with Louis XV quickly drew criticism, disparaging judgments and other form of opposition to her. Her main adversaries included the clan of "dévots" and the authors of "poissonades", who criticized her ostentatious spending, her miscarriages and physical changes, and blamed her for the king's venereal diseases and for her allegedly overwhelming responsibility for both the reversal of alliances during the Seven Years' War. One side-effect of these libels, and other hostile printed matter, was that they brought her media celebrity status at a time when, as a recent symposium organized by the Collège de France showed (*Lumières médiatiques*, dir. Antoine Lilti, June 18–19, 2024, available online on the Collège de France's *Histoire et archéologie* youtube channel¹), public opinion was resonating more and more with the multiplication of news media. Her negative representation in the collective imagination was thus largely settled or determined from that time onwards, and has continued to resonate almost right up to the present day in subsequent works that have taken an interest in this historical figure.

It was not until the end of the 19th century that historiography began to move in the opposite direction, in particular with the Goncourt brothers, who rehabilitated her by dithyrambically describing her as "the

Queen of Rococo" (for contrasting views on Madame de Pompadour in 19th-century historiography, see Thomas Catherine, *Les Goncourt et la petite histoire de la marquise de Pompadour*, in: *Cahiers Edmond et Jules de Goncourt* 12, 2005, 47–59). It was to this emphatic approach that Donald Posner reacted, in his 1990 article, a contribution that continues to be cited as a "reference" concerning the Pompadour, even though its partisan interpretations are disconcerting for today's readers (M^{me} de Pompadour as a Patron of the Visual Arts, in: *The Art Bulletin* LXXII/1, march 1990, 74–105). While providing a comprehensive overview of the Marquise's many fields of action – in architecture, manufacturing and the arts of all kinds – his conclusions, though quite dated, tended to systematically minimize the value of her contributions, with no argument or reason other than blatant misogyny. According to Posner, Madame de Pompadour had only a ceremonial intelligence and a minor aesthetic sense when compared to the so-called "men of taste" she introduced at court or supported, such as the directors of the Bâtiments, Charles-Nicolas Cochin, Jacques-Germain Soufflot and Jean Lassur-ance. On what criteria were these assertions based? A mystery.

Since then, a number of publications have distanced themselves from these approaches, returning to archival sources and a careful study of the various aspects of Madame de Pompadour's personality, a woman who was de facto a collector, patron, amateur artist, actress, dancer, protector and promoter of the arts (see for example Katie Scott, *Framing ambition: the interior politics of Madame de Pompadour*, in: *Art History* 28/2, April 2005, 248–290; Thibaut Wolvesperges, *Madame de Pompadour et la montée en puissance de Sèvres au milieu des années 1750. Étude comparative du marché des porcelaines de Chine, de Meissen et de Vincennes-Sèvres*, in: *Artistes, musées et collections: un hommage à Antoine Schnapper*, ed. by Véronique Gérard Powell, Paris 2016, 123–139). The exhibition presented at the Château de Versailles, the Hypo Kunsthalle in Munich, and the National Gallery in London in 2002/03, and its catalogue (*Ma-*



Fig. 1 | Oval Chamber Pot (pot de chambre ovale or bourdaloue), c. 1750. Vincennes porcelain, painted with blue flowers, 23,3 cm. Vienna, Belvedere Collection. Savill, fig. 8.4

dame de Pompadour et les arts. Exh. cat. ed. by Xavier Salmon, Paris 2002), gave an exemplary account of these activities, as does the book discussed here.

Mistress of the King's Pleasures

Although the latter concentrates on the close relationship between the Marquise and the Manufacture de Vincennes-Sèvres, it succeeds in restoring a full sense of the environment and culture that she animated around her. Henceforth, it will no longer be possible to consider the history of the arts under Louis XV without this exceptional compendium of information, compiled by the late Rosalind Savill in a superb 1120-page book (see the reviews by Caroline McCaffrey-Howarth in: *Apollo* 195/705, Febr. 2022, 90–91 and Alden R. Gordon in: *Journal* 18, Dec. 2022⁷⁾). The data is supported by a rich and precise set of notes and documentary appendices, and by numerous high-quality reproductions of works. To establish a factual and fascinating history of this entwined relationship between the Marquise de Pompadour and the Manufacture de Vincennes-Sèvres, the author constructs her 21 chapters year by year, from the Marquise's arrival at court to her death, with a wealth of detail on the context, her entourage, her activities and all that they entailed, month by month, day by day, in terms of commissions, artistic impulses and relations with the art world.

This method, though somewhat demanding to read, perfectly reflects the nature of the Marquise's magisterium, which was carried out in a daily, intimate, even prosaic reality. Porcelain pieces illustrate this rela-

tionship with daily intimacy, with for example a shuttle for needlework (537, fig. 13.6), a writing case for correspondence (861–862, fig. 17.26–29), or chamber pots also known as “bourdaloues” (164, fig. 8.3 and 8.4; bidet, 633, fig. 14.41). | Fig. 1 | The medical care the Marquise’s frail health required gave rise to some ingenious creations, such as this “pot pourri à l’esprit de vin” | Fig. 2 |, an unusual object with multiple functions housed in the Wallace Collection, fitted at its base with a vessel for steaming eggs, topped by a perfume burner, itself dominated by a lid in the shape of a hen’s nest with its chicks (810, fig. 16.33). Lively anecdotes support Savill’s narrative, a kind of biographical account that, by extension, captures the domestic nature of the French monarchical system, conceived and managed as a House.



| Fig. 2 | Perfume Burner and Egg Steamer with a Fuel Dish (pot pourri à l’esprit de vin), for 1759. Sèvres porcelain, green ground painted with a cherub representing the Sense of Smell and equipment for burning perfume, the hen on her nest naturalistically coloured, 22,6 × 10,7 cm. London, Wallace Collection. Savill, fig. 16.33

As the king’s mistress, Madame de Pompadour was responsible for Louis XV’s pleasures: sexual and gastronomic pleasures, entertainment through shows, banquets and games. Between 1747 and 1751, in the space of just four years, she organized no fewer than 54 operas, opera-ballets and pantomimes for this purpose, in which she often acted herself. She contributed to the emergence of new scenic forms and repertoires, particularly those featuring pastorals, which were also abundantly expressed in the iconography of the arts of this time. These bucolic figures of young peasants in love, in graceful poses, surrounded by cultivated flowers and semi-domesticated animals, were amongst the most fashionable motifs of the time, and found an expansion in contemporary European productions. Madame de Pompadour’s close ties with the theater found a special home in her favorite painter, François Boucher. She spent her time at Versailles and at the various properties she had been granted, some fifteen in all, many of which have since disappeared (Châteaux de Crécy, Bellevue, Champs-sur-Marne, Choisy, Fontainebleau, Saint-Ouen, Ménars, Hôtel d’Évreux in Paris, Hôtel des Réservoirs in Versailles, etc.).

Domestic and Political Activities

Rosalind Savill draws on three main types of sources to reconstruct Pompadour’s activities, their organization and operation at the junction of the domestic and the political: chronicles of the time (memoirs by the Marquis d’Argenson, the Duc de Luynes, etc.), which in turn reflect the events and debates sparked by the Marquise’s presence; archival documents relating to the Vincennes-Sèvres factory, in particular delivery registers dating from 1747 to 1763, as well as the accounts of Lazare Duvaux, one of the main merchants selling Vincennes-Sèvres pieces in Paris, in addition to his sales of Asian and European porcelain; and finally, Savill draws on inventories of Pompadour’s apartments and possessions, including those inherited by her brother, the Marquis de Marigny, in 1764. All this documentary material is presented with a rare concern for clarity and completeness, enhanced by



| Fig. 3 | Pot-Pourri Vase (vase pot pourri à vaisseau ou en navire), for 1759. Sèvres porcelain, lapis and green ground painted with a Teniers scene on the front and flowers on the back, 45,2 × 37,8 × 19,3 cm. London, The Royal Collection. Savill, fig. 16.12

direct extracts in most chapters, and appendices that will serve as a valuable basis for further research. In addition to compiling a complete list of all purchases of porcelain from Vincennes-Sèvres made by the Marquise de Pompadour, and identifying the orders she may have instigated according to her personal needs and those of the King's entertainments, the author has unearthed previously unpublished or little-known works. Savill's expert skills, acquired during her career as director of the Wallace Collection, and her vast knowledge of British Royal Collections **| Fig. 3 |**, as well as those of private collectors in the United Kingdom and the United States, bring treasures out of the shadows, which the photographs bring to light admirably. Readers will find a marvel of presentation, such as a "fontaine à dauphins" pot-pourri vase **| Fig. 4 |**, visible in its one-piece mounted version and in its dismantled version in the collections of Boughton House, Northamptonshire (791, fig. 16.13). Reproductions are not limited to the Vincennes-Sèvres pieces, as a number of little-known drawings and paintings are also presented, such as the portraits of her by François Guérin of the E. B. Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento (16, fig. 2.1) and

by François Boucher at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne (354, fig. 11.1). **| Fig. 5 |**

In this compendium of porcelain pieces the wealth of types (vases, potpourris, table and cabaret services, etc.), shapes and colors, and the variety of sources of inspiration, ranging from Antiquity to the Orient, from Flemish bambochades to Russian or Turkish discoveries, from chubby cherubs to animals of all kinds, stand out. This profusion stems from the quality of inventiveness and technical innovation generated by the factory at this particular moment in its history, when a new team was set up, bringing together a



| Fig. 4 | Pair of Pot-Pourri Vases and Flower Pots (vases pot pourri fontaine à dauphin), for 1760. Sèvres porcelain, lapis and green ground painted with Teniers scenes on the fronts by Charles-Nicolas Dodin and with flowers on the backs, with later gilt-bronze mounts, 34,3 cm. Northamptonshire, Boughton House. Savill, fig. 16.13

group of talented scientists and artists, who pooled their respective skills. Among them, chemist Jean Hellot stood out for his invention of saturated, sophisticated colors, with variations of lapis blue, turquoise celestial blue and exuberant pinks, purples and greens. Madame de Pompadour stimulated a regime of scarcity – scarcity of form, of sources of inspiration, of materials and techniques – proper to luxury that were, therefore, apt to impress even the crowned heads of Europe.

The Social and Cultural Context

Beyond a descriptive approach focused on stylistic analysis of the works, the author also outlines a history of customs, curial practices and, more broadly, the social habitus of the period. In fact, in each chapter, the reader will find synthetic developments on the arts of perfume and drugs such as tobacco; on the arts of the table (services and drinks, desserts and snacks); on the different forms of lighting and luminaries (candlesticks, lanterns, day and night lamps, fireplace arms); on the distribution logics that prevailed between each of the rooms in the apartments. The arts of the toilette hold a special place, notably in chapter 10, with commentary or information on cosmetics, materials and utensils for body care and hygiene (329–340). Madame de Pompadour took full advantage of the performance of the toilette, a major social event in the 18th century. At the confluence of the private and the public, this ritual was abundantly represented in the engravings and paintings of the time, to the point of becoming an iconographic subject in its own right (Melissa Hyde, The “makeup” of the Marquise: Boucher’s portrait of Pompadour at her toilette, in: *The Art Bulletin* 82, 2000, 453–475).

The perspective provided by Savill’s treatment of the various domains of what we might describe as material culture, also enables us to link certain tastes, aspirations and interests specific to the Marquise, which are eloquently reflected in the choice of subjects for the decorations at Vincennes-Sèvres. This is the case, for example, with the animal motifs, and more particularly with the birds, represented in the deco-



| Fig. 5 | François Boucher, *Madame de Pompadour*, 1754. Pastel on buff paper, 36,5 × 28,1 cm. Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, Nr. 1482-5 ➔

rative cartouches as canaries, titmice, goldfinches or parrots. These can be explained by the numerous aviaries, and cages that the Marquise loved and had installed in her residences, in her parks or next to her dairies, of which she was also a pioneer long before Marie-Antoinette (between 1748 and 1754, she had no less than five created in her hermitages; 262), and through her close ties with the Comte de Buffon and his wife. Madame de Pompadour had her own pets, birds and other creatures depicted by the decorators at Vincennes-Sèvres (799, figs. 16.25–26) **| Fig. 6 |**; a number of porcelain pieces were used to decorate flowers, vases, bowls, crates, baskets or potpourris (540f., figs. 13.9 and 13.10; 562–565, figs. 13.27–29). Louis XV shared her passion for the natural sciences and botany, through his own menageries and gardens, which he cultivated himself.



Fig. 6 | Pot-Pourri Vase (vase pot pourri Hébert), front, for 1759. Sèvres porcelain, missing its cover, green ground painted with birds in landscapes, 27,6 × 23,6 cm. Sèvres, Musée. Savill, fig. 16.25

Networking

Rosalind Savill's book, with its various points of entry, provokes, inspires and invites further exploration. Let's hope that its sumptuous, and consequently costly, edition, and its still (too) discreet presence in bookshops and libraries, do not hinder its much-needed dissemination among those interested in this period of art history. Through this in-depth case study, the book provides a major key to understanding the orchestration of arts policy of the time and its connections with Madame de Pompadour and her cohort. The first thread underpinning this policy is the strength of interpersonal networks, later confirmed by inter-institutional networks. Indeed, circles, coteries, clans and sometimes factions gathered around the Marquise, pooling their knowledge and know-how to work in the service of politics, at various levels.

At the outset, this stratification of networks (from the private to the institutional levels) stemmed from a desire for social ascension, through the interplay of marital and family alliances: through her mother's own alliances with men of high finance, Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson was educated and then introduced to the court to take on the role we know her for, through a layering of reciprocal protections at various levels. Her birth family had ties of interest with the

three main shareholders of the Manufacture de Vincennes-Sèvres (22); these contacts were undoubtedly used to promote the King's decision to attach the original private company to the royal budget. In 1746, Louis XV made an initial investment of 40,000 livres in the company, before joining the Gobelins and the Savonnerie, the other major factories of the Bâtiments department, in 1759. This statutory change took place against a backdrop of shifting networks of influence, from the group of financiers formed around Philibert Orry, Director of Bâtiments since 1736, who also held the position of Contrôle Général des Finances, to the clan emanating from the Poissons and Pâris families. The royal decision to place the factory under public financing was fully endorsed by the two successive directors whom the Marquise had played a key role in having appointed to head the Bâtiments: first her uncle (or natural father) Charles-François Le Normant de Tournehem, whose nephew, Guillaume Lenormant d'Étiolles, she had married, and then her brother Abel-François Poisson de Vandières, Marquis de Marigny.

The consequences of this strategic positioning extended beyond the confines of the Vincennes-Sèvres factory. Indeed, many extensions and ramifications can be identified: it was notably with the support of financier Joseph Pâris-Duverney (who was the brother of her godfather, Jean Pâris de Montmartel) that she contributed to the foundation of the Invalides military school, recognized by royal edict in 1751; it was the friendly relations she maintained with Abbé de Bernis, which earned him his appointment to the Foreign Affairs Department; she also helped to place the Duc de Choiseul, who was nothing less than Louis XV's principal minister, etc. She was involved in the appointment of Étienne de Silhouette as Finance Minister in 1759 – in short, a tight-knit network of agents devoted to Pompadour's cause and that of the sovereign.

In this context, her private acquisitions and commissions at the Manufacture de Vincennes-Sèvres are indicative of her "purchasing power", which had eminent political implications and repercussions. This

was because her personal attraction to porcelain, which made her an outstanding collector, contributed at least as much to satisfying her own taste as to establishing her as a “patroness of the arts”, or even an “influencer”, in modern terms, linked to the service of the monarchy.

Production at Vincennes-Sèvres

She promoted artists whom she appreciated in the Vincennes-Sèvres production system, such as Jean-Baptiste Oudry and François Boucher, as providers of models, and even more to positions of responsibility as workshop heads. This was the case with Jean-Jacques Bachelier, who introduced numerous technical and stylistic discoveries during his tenure, or Étienne-Maurice Falconet, whose sculpture of *L'Amour menaçant*, originally placed in the gardens of the Hôtel d'Évreux, became a veritable bestseller with its version in Sèvres porcelain *biscuit* (720, fig. 15.63; 982, fig. 19.26; 984, fig. 19.28). | Fig. 7 |

The artistic choices and the stakes of excellence assigned to the establishment were aimed at imposing it on the international scene, with a clear desire to match and then surpass its main competitor, the Saxon porcelain manufactory. Rosalind Savill's book presents examples of flowers “au naturel”, which Meissen had made a specialty of, showing a significant voluntarism in this respect (see reproductions of examples in the Adrian Sassoon Collection, 60, fig. 4.8–9, or at the Wadsworth Artheneum in Hartford, 96, fig. 6.2), as well as the development of the famous *biscuit* porcelain, characterized by its whiteness and matte finish, which sets it apart from the enameled and colored statuettes of its European rival. Moreover, the diplomatic gifts for which the Marquise de Pompadour was responsible attest to the extent to which they served the kingdom's commercial interests, particularly with regard to England, another great power in commercial competition with French productions. For example, her first foreign gift from the Vincennes-Sèvres factory was to the Duke of Newcastle in London in 1751, one of her many regular correspondents in England (172f.; these also in-



| Fig. 7 | Cupid (*L'Amour* Falconet), c. 1758. Sèvres biscuit porcelain, incised F for Falconet, 23,5 cm. Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire. Savill, fig. 15.63

cluded, among others, the Abbé Le Blanc, the King's historiographer, who acted as an informer on the other side of the Channel).

Gender Perspectives

Savill's book does not claim to take this approach, but it does open up some stimulating perspectives for anyone interested in gender studies. Questioning Madame de Pompadour's place as a woman in the art politics of her time, the levers she mobilized to make her voice heard, the liveliness and, above all, the nature of the critical reception to which she was subjected, which constantly brought her back to her gender, lead us to rethink the contours of a definition of “influential power” in politics.

Contrary to what her detractors would have us believe, Madame de Pompadour had to deploy much more than caprice and intrigue to win over the king to become “such a pretty Prime Minister”, as the Duc de Croÿ called her in his *Journal* (1718–84). Even today, she is still too often seen solely as “the king's mistress”, a role she officially held for only five years.



| Fig. 8a | François Boucher, *Les Génies des Arts*, 1761. Painting on canvas, 3,20 × 3,20 m. Angers, Musée des Beaux-Arts, inv. MBA 17 (J.1881) ↗



| Fig. 8b | Noël Hallé, *Les Génies des Sciences, de la Poésie, de l'Histoire, de la Physique et de l'Astronomie*, 1761. Canvas, 3,71 × 3,75 m. Paris, musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures, Inv. 5279. En dépôt: Angers, Musée des Beaux Arts ↗

Indeed, it would be to underestimate the sovereign's political acumen to think that he would have continued to seek her advice right up to his Council for a further fourteen years, even though he no longer coveted her as a sexual partner. As early as 1750, he preferred the young favorites she provided him with at the Parc aux Cerfs. Her complicity with philosophers such as Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot and d'Alembert; with her private physician, François Quesnay, the father of physiocracy; and with other close friends, such as Buffon and Turgot, testify to the extent of her influence on courtly trends and, beyond that, on the enlightened culture of her time.

The Marquise devised a number of skilful means to protect her position until her death, and to attempt to acquire new public legitimacy once she was away from the king's bed. One of these was to develop an iconography depicting her in the guise of "Amitié", which found applications in sculpture, in large format with the statue by Jean-Baptiste Pigalle placed in the Bellevue gardens in 1753, and in small format in their miniaturized version in *biscuit* porcelain from Vincennes-Sèvres (109, 143, 276f., fig. 10.4, 326). In addition to allegories magnifying royal patronage under her auspices (the tapestry cartoons *Les Génies des Arts* by François Boucher | Fig. 8a | and *Les Génies des Sciences, de la Poésie, de l'Histoire, de la Physique*

et de l'Astronomie by Noël Hallé, preserved at the Musée des Beaux-Arts d'Angers | Fig. 8b |, this theme of Friendship showed the extent to which she used her elective relationship with the sovereign to suggest an evolution in their relationship, at a time when she was increasingly ill and saw herself in disgrace. The interpersonal, intellectual and social skills – in short, the tact – that she had acquired from her youth in the Salons, including those of Mesdames Deffand and Geoffrin, had made her a true strategist. Taking this into consideration in the light of the cluster of conclusive evidence provided by Savill would make it possible to articulate a different discourse about the Pompadour. Such a consideration suggests the idea of a collaboration between her and the king, of a co-construction that was not based on parity but was real, made up of ongoing negotiations, rather than continuing to subalternize her action, as was still the case in the recent exhibition at the Château de Versailles, where her evocation remained confined to a small room on the bangs and unconnected to the others (*Louis XV [1710–1774]: passions d'un roi*. Exh. cat., Paris 2022). Indeed, the very way in which some of the scholarship continues to debate the validity of her aesthetic judgement or the legitimacy of her political meaning still bears the scars of a gendered value system that needs to evolve.