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Book Review

Addressed to Posterity: The Visual Histories of Louis XIV

BY MARK JONES

Robert Wellington, *Antiquarianism and the Visual Histories of Louis XIV: Artifacts for a Future Past* (Ashgate, Farnham, 2015), 286 pp., £65, includes 8 colour and 79 b/w ills.

Louis XIV was the most systematically ambitious of monarchs, determined that his rule would save his country from the internecine strife that had riven it periodically in the decades before he came to the throne, and which scarred him as a child and youthful monarch during the years of the Fronde. He saw himself as the only person in whom the interests of the state and of the individual perfectly coincided and, in that sense, not only as the ruler but also as the embodiment of France.

The King's programme of self-commemoration, that began as soon as he took power after the death of Mazarin and the arrest of Fouquet in 1661, was crucial in the legitimization of monarchical supremacy. Robert Wellington's book focuses on a sometimes neglected aspect of this programme, the medallic history of the reign, work on which started in 1662, reached an apogee with the publication of the great folio volume *Médailles sur les principaux événements du règne de Louis le Grand* published in 1702, and terminated after Louis' death with the publication of a second edition, covering the whole reign, in 1723.

Wellington's purpose is to re-emphasise the central importance of the medallic history to a proper understanding of the glorification of Louis in all the visual arts and to reinterpret that history as an essentially antiquarian endeavour. He points to the fashion for collecting and interpreting ancient coins among those close to the King, including his uncles Gaston d'Orléans and the duc de Verneuil, his brother Philippe d'Orléans and his sister-in-law Madame Palatine, his minister Colbert and his first gentleman of the bedchamber the duc d'Aumont. The latter held a salon devoted to the study of ancient coins, or medals as they were known in the seventeenth century, regularly attended by Louis' confessor Père La Chaise as well as those responsible for his collections. With the King's support, d'Aumont's medallic salon embarked on a history of the Roman emperors, based on the evidence provided by coins and inscriptions which, Wellington argues, was the intellectual model for the medallic history and indeed other aspects of the commemoration of Louis' reign.

Wellington recalls the magnificence and symbolic significance of the lost Cabinet des Médailles at Versailles, which housed the royal collection from 1684, and its relationship to the neighbouring Salon d'Abondance. The King himself was fascinated by medals and took a close interest in the work of Pierre Rainssant and his colleagues, who catalogued and interpreted his collection.

The 'Little Academy', founded by Colbert to advise on the intellectual programme for works of royal commemoration in 1663, included among its members antiquarians like Rainssant as

well the historiographers royal Racine and Boileau, the Abbé Tallemant, and François Charpentier. Wellington argues that their work, not only on the medals but also on the sets of tapestries produced at the Gobelins and Charles Le Brun's great decorative schemes for Versailles are informed and shaped by an antiquarian desire to spare their successors the problems which they themselves faced in interpreting the medals of the past by providing enlightening commentary. Certainly this is true of Tallemant's preface to the 1702 edition of the medallic history. It takes such evident and irritating pride in the erudition of the academicians, and the elegance and concision with which they described historic events and interpreted the symbolism of the medals recording them, that it was suppressed by the King and removed from all but a few examples of the book. But it could be argued both that this risks underestimating the academicians' desire to communicate to contemporaries and that the scholarly interests of the Academy of Medals and Inscriptions, as they developed late in the reign, tend rather to obscure the boldly modern approach to commemoration earlier adopted by the first secretary of the academy, Charles Perrault, and his colleagues. It may be that the increasing emphasis on antiquity and indeed on posterity evident in the 1690s, reflects in part at least a loss of confidence in the present, which led to the replacement of bold assertion of current triumphs with nostalgia for past greatness and a growing desire to shape and control future interpretation of Louis' reign.

Overall, the serious and systematic way in which Wellington uses the visual and material evidence, and the sureness of his interpretation, combined with his mastery of the intellectual currents that drove and shaped the commemoration of Louis' reign, make this a fascinating and enlightening treatment of an extraordinary undertaking.

Mark Jones

Sir Mark Jones is Master of Saint Cross College, Oxford. He was Curator of Medals at the British Museum (1974–92), Director of the National Museums of Scotland (1992–2001) and Director of the V&A (2001–11). He has written extensively on the history of the medal.