

Publication

Institutionalizing Practices through Print

One demonstration of early-modern interest in the technology and science of craft practices was the organized effort to collect and publish information about artisan techniques. Conceived as national projects in the late seventeenth century, scientific and improvement societies often discussed—and occasionally instituted—the description, classification, and dissemination of information about significant arts and handicrafts. The Royal Society's History of Trades never developed into a much of a program, but efforts at the Paris Academy of Sciences continued sporadically over decades.¹ Many of the treatises that mark that endeavor—collectively known as the *Descriptions des arts et métiers*—were translated into other languages, providing to foreign manufacturers what might be considered secrets of French techniques and, at the same time, creating a de facto standard for artisan practices as varied as hatmaking, fishing, shipbuilding, and cutlery.

Arthur Cole, in his 1952 monograph about the series, notes the involvement and recognition of practical men in the French project. Some books were written by academicians with the collaboration of appropriate tradespeople; others are credited to one or the other alone.² In general, books included within the *Descriptions des arts et métiers* followed a similar format. There were generally four sections: a history of the subject was followed by descriptions of the raw materials used, the tools and equipment, and details of the steps needed to produce desirable results. This was an order that mimicked the established pattern of experimental reporting at the Paris Academy of Sciences and similar institutions. In this, such publications are different from the earlier *kunstabüchlein* or other compilations, where the information is more randomly ordered and consists almost exclusively of instructions.

Cole emphasizes the range of subjects included in the series, noting that they form a positive example of the state of technology in eighteenth-century France. Nevertheless the selection of subjects was often serendipitous. There were no guidelines for inclusion, or at least none that were observed through the decades. Not all of the six *corporations* and forty-four *communités* of arts and trades of France are represented, but it does not appear that there was an organized effort by any guild to prevent or encourage publication.

The *Descriptions des arts et métiers* and the Creation of Color in Objects

About six of the more than fifty treatises which comprise the *Descriptions*

incorporate colormaking procedures—albeit indirectly. In the second part of Roland de la Platière's *Art de préparer et d'imprimer les étoffes en laines*, for example, the process of making color for that use is cataloged, as are proper methods of its application.³ *L'Art d'indigotier* discusses indigo preparation, and Pierre Le Vieil's volume describes colors in a section about painting on glass.⁴ Color-related topics appear in other books. The presentation of color production as part of the creation of the whole object reinforced the perception that coloring processes were inseparable from objects. It also limited the information about color sources, materials, and techniques to that relevant to the subject of the book: there is no room for digressions into making painters lakes or scarlet cloth in Le Vieil's *L'Art de a peinture sur verre et de la viterie*, as readers could find in Antonio Neri's *L'Arte vetraria*.⁵ Given the need for color and varnishes as protective coatings and as essential elements of good decoration, the lack of a separate publication on either is conspicuous, as Jean-Félix Watin complained. Perhaps the absence of a treatise on painter's colors is evidence of opposition from the Academy of Painting and Sculpture or the Académie de St-Luc, a suggestion that each institution's vision of their respective identity was stronger than that of the occupations that were scrutinized and written-about. Perhaps these groups were more insular than others, or believed themselves threatened by nonmembers, as the rejection of zinc white and other contentious episodes suggest. Or perhaps the painting manuals then available filled this role, providing information about colors and varnishing within an appropriate context, but separate from the series.

Notes:

Note 1: Kathleen H. Ochs, "The Royal Society of London's History of Trades Programme: An Early Episode in Applied Science," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 39 (1985): 129–58; Arthur H. Cole, *The Handicrafts of France as Recorded in the "Description des Arts et Métiers, 1761-1788"* Kress Library of Business and Economics Publication 8 (Cambridge, Mass, 1952).

Note 2: Cole, *The Handicrafts of France*.

Note 3: Jean-Marie Roland de la Platière, *L'Art de préparer et d'imprimer les étoffes en laines, suivi de l'art de fabriquer les pannes ou pelouches, les velours façon d'Utrecht . . .* (Paris, 1780).

Note 4: De Beauvais-Raseau, *L'Art de l'indigotier* (Paris, 1770); Pierre Le Vieil, *L'art de la peinture sur verre et de la viterie* (Paris, 1774).

Note 5: Antonio Neri, et al., *L'Art de la verrerie, de Neri, Merret et Kunckel. Auquel on a ajouté Le sol sine veste d'Orschall; L'Helioscopium videndi sine veste solem chymicum; Le sol non sine veste; Le chapitre XI du Flora Saturnizans de Henckel, sur la vitrification des végétaux; Un mémoire sur la maniere de faire le saffre*, trans. M. D. [Paul Dietrich, Baron d'Holbach] (Paris, 1752), 244–49.