

Artists and Colormen

Mauclerc

Je ne suis qu'un manipulateur, j'en prévien le Public. Je dois mes connoissances à trente ans d'usage. La pratique en fait d'Art, vaut mieux, dit-on, que la spéculation.

Jean-Félix Watin, *L'Art du peintre, doreur, vernisseur*. (Paris, 1772), xij.

Was Mauclerc's treatise on varnish-making nothing more than the product of professional rivalry, or was it driven by other, perhaps personal elements as well? In the section of his treatise called "Refutation d'un Livre Intitulé: l'Art de Faire et d'Employer le Vernis," Mauclerc remarks on a family's destruction having been caused by this manipulator Watin: Is this a personal reference?¹ A better understanding of the working life of Mauclerc might create a stronger and more appropriate context for the disagreement between these two men. Personal history might also place Mauclerc more securely within the communities of artists and artisans, consumers and intellectuals. Unfortunately, there is not much information about this man—so little that it has proved impossible even to locate his full name. A few details can be culled from Mauclerc's *Traité de couleurs et vernis* and from comments in Jean-Félix Watin's *Supplément à "l'Art du peintre doreur vernisseur,"* but there is no way to verify these assertions.

Un buffet haut de huit pieds, dont la base avoit environ trois pieds & demi de largeur & de profondeur sur la hauteur de trios pieds, contenoit trois jeux d'orgue, un portevent masqué par un tableau couvert par un double clavier. Le haut du buffet, de même largeur, sur la profondeur d'environ deux pieds, étoit rempli d'évantaills fermés, placés à distances suffisantes pour être tous ouverts sans se gêner les uns les autres. La même touche, qui tiroit un son de l'orgue, ouvroit un éventail, dont la couleur étoit analogue au son. D'abord, les éventails étoient d'une seule teinte, mais ils ont été ensuite historiés; les uns représentoient des oiseaux sur des arbres; d'autres, des paysages . . . chacun portoit une couleur dominante analogue au son; le reste, de l'éventail étoit en harmonie avec les accompagnements de l'orgue.

Mauclerc. *Traité des couleurs et vernis* (Paris, 1773), 26–8.

Mauclerc stated that he was 18 years old when he worked for Jacob Christoph Le Blon. If this experience took place at Le Blon's Paris atelier, then he would have been born between 1719 and 1723 and so about fifty years old in 1773. It is probable that, despite the French association of his name, he was not native to that country. Was he, like Le Blon, from a Huguenot family? Watin refers constantly to his awkward use of language, inventing an abbreviation (*a.p.f.* or *autrement pour les français*) that draws attention to Mauclerc's many nonnative expressions. Some of these—for example, *il décredite* instead of *il discredite*, or *les uns peintres* instead of *les unes*—might be typographical errors as easily as grammatical mistakes, although Watin's point may have been that even a well-educated foreigner would know these were wrong.² Jacques-Fabien Gautier d'Agoty also hinted at Mauclerc's foreignness when he claimed that Mauclerc's participation at Le Blon's atelier resulted from a meeting between his father and

Le Blon on the coach from Calais; Gautier d'Agoty's comment suggests that the two men fled to Paris together in 1737.³ It is not clear, however, that Mauclerc *fils* arrived in Paris at the same time.

Information about Mauclerc's experiences as he worked on Louis-Bertrand Castel's ocular harpsichord shed no further light—we don't know when or where he was engaged with this project. Was his involvement during Castel's experiments of the late 1730s?⁴ Did he read of Castel's experiments and the debates about its validity and value and attempt to build an ocular harpsichord of his own? Mauclerc mentions an apparatus with beautifully painted fans that rise when keys are struck, but this description does not match what we know of Castel's model.⁵

Mauclerc called himself a *marchand épicier* and as such he should have been a member of a corporate entity. No record of this association remains, however. His shop was located on the rue Quincampoix; a location that suggests much but again without verification. Earlier in the eighteenth century the street became famous as the site of John Law's countinghouse, and intimations of financial speculation and potential ruin continued through the century, via the goldsmiths' shops and gambling houses located there. In the 1780s it was a street that included several apothecaries' and druggists' shops as well as the offices of the *Corps des Merciers*, the hôtel of the commissioner of the Châtelet and other lawyers, doctors, and merchants.⁶ There is no mention of a Mauclerc living or working there, but that is not unusual and does not mean he did not.

Mauclerc in his writing hinted at access to special chemical colors, and his descriptions of colors and discussions of painting deterioration indicate a strong interest in chemistry. Details about this interest, how it developed or was satisfied, are not included in his book. Nor are there petitions in his name to the government, or to the academies of science or painting and sculpture, explaining his ideas or his invented materials. Were these chemical colors his? Were they inventions of a colleague? Or were they, as Watin claims, fantasies?

Who *were* Mauclerc's associates? Did Mauclerc have family? What was his relationship to the corporations and societies of which he might have been a member? Nothing is certain. If he was Mauclerc the engraver, why did he state that engraving was not his occupation?⁷ Was he the same Mauclerc who, from Chalons en Bourgogne (Chalons sur Saône) in 1789, wrote pamphlets about the Bastille?⁸ Was he related to John Henry Mauclerc the English physician, or to Paul Émile de Mauclerc, a Protestant cleric in Brandenburg and a member of the Berlin Academy of Sciences? There is no way to know.

Notes:

Note 1: Mauclerc, *marchand épicier. Traité des couleurs et vernis* (Paris, 1773), 31.

Note 2: Jean-Félix Watin, *Supplément à "L'Art du peintre doreur vernisseur," par le sieur Watin, peintre, doreur, vernisseur, & marchand des couleurs, doreurs, et vernis* (Paris, 1773), 37, 20.

Note 3: "Suite de la Lettre de M. Gautier," in Watin, *Supplément*, 23–26.

Note 4: Donald S. Schier, *Louis-Bernard Castel, anti-Newtonian Scientist*, (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1941).

Note 5: Mauclerc, *Traité des couleurs et vernis*, 24–28.

Note 6: Charles Lefeuvre, *Histoire de Paris rue par rue maison par maison*, 5th ed. (Paris, 1875), 5: 453–65.

Note 7: Ralph Nevill, *French Prints of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1908), 121.

Note 8: Mauclerc, *Adresse respectueuse a l'Assemblée Nationale, sur la réformation des loix criminelles*, (Paris, 1789); Mauclerc, *Le langage des murs, ou, les cachots de la Bastille dévoilant leurs secrets*, ([Paris], 1789).
