

Book Reviews

Creating French Culture: Treasures from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Eds. Marie-Helene Tesnier and Prosser Gifford. New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Pr., 1995. 480p. \$65. ISBN 0-300-06283-4. LC 95-6886.

First came the treasures from the Vatican; now we have treasures from the Bibliothèque Nationale. The Library of Congress deserves a toast for this, the second in its series of blockbuster exhibits from the great libraries of the world. Thomas Hoving could not have done better.

Exhibitions of “treasures” are usually catch bins of high spots that have no thematic coherence. However, this one holds together better than most. It has a theme, and it is implicit in the title—*Creating French Culture*. The singular form of culture may be striking to an American audience conditioned to thinking of culture in the plural. The notion of French “cultures,” however, sounds wrong, and the present catalogue helps us understand how and why. Its theme is “power and culture,” and it captures something quintessentially French about French culture. Power and culture are as French as *haute couture* and *haute cuisine*. Those four gleaming towers of the new Bibliothèque de France on the rue Tolbiac speak volumes—or, rather, terabytes—about the power of culture and the culture of power in France.

This sumptuous catalog, splendidly produced by Yale University Press, brings together an impressive team of French curators from the Bibliothèque Nationale and distinguished American historians in a collaborative effort that sometimes works and sometimes does not. The exhibit tries to do two things at once: sketch a history of France (or at least of French elites) and tell the story

of the royal (then the national) library. To the historians fell the unenviable task of providing short overviews of large tracts of French history. Some rise elegantly to the task. The essays by Elizabeth Brown and Orest Ranum on the monarchy and culture are suggestive and evocative without trying to be comprehensive. Peter Gay, on the other hand, seems fatigued at the outset and produces a bare summary chronicle of France in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Accompanying the historical sketches are pieces by curators recounting the growth of the royal and national library. The particularity of these forays is a bit jarring alongside the generality and grand themes of the historical overviews. But probably such asymmetries could not be avoided.

However, the meat of the volume is found in the catalog entries themselves, which are, by and large, quite superior. Catalog entries are often occasions for curators to display arcane knowledge in uninteresting ways. The team of Bibliothèque Nationale curators largely avoided issues of technique and technicality, providing instead small gems that contextualize the books, manuscripts, coins, prints, maps, and drawings in the exhibit. Through them and the artifacts to which they point, it truly is possible to appreciate the double historical trajectory of the exhibit. The catalog entries begin with a spectacular selection of manuscripts from the Carolingian period through the Renaissance. If anyone ever doubted the sheer wealth of royal and monastic cultures in the Middle Ages and the central role played by manuscripts in manifesting that wealth, this catalogue will dispel all skep-



ticism. Nowhere else in the exhibit does the theme of power and culture work so well. These were books made for kings and for the secular and the sacred elites of the medieval world: lectionaries, sacramentaries, biblical commentaries, histories, chronicles, philosophy, classics, epitomes, even some stray exotica, imported from Spain, such as a Latin rendering of a collection of fables in Sanskrit. They required the power of wealth to commission, and they confirmed the status of that power in their very richness.

By the seventeenth century, Orest Ranum reminds us, the enormous power of the monarchy implicated it—for better or worse—in almost every sphere of life. Richelieu, Colbert, and Louis XIV pursued a single-minded policy of cultural consolidation and concentration: Versailles and Paris became the twin axes of cultural production and consumption, power and authority. Among other things, the scattered holdings of the royal library were centralized in Paris, where a succession of able librarians began the labor of organizing them and where the monarchy embarked on an unprecedented campaign of collection building. The library, Leroy Ladurie emphasizes, was, like everything else, supposed to add to the glory of the king.

However, much of the material selected for this part of the exhibit derives its status not from its royal provenance but, rather, from its opposition to power—from Vauban and Fenelon to Marat and Beaumarchais and the eve of the Revolution. There are many gems here too: the manuscripts of St.-Simon's memoirs, of Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, of D'Alembert's *Dream* by Diderot, of Laclos's *Dangerous Acquaintances*, and of Beaumarchais's *Figaro*, not to mention Rousseau's heavily annotated copy of Helvetius and Marat's own copy of his *Ami du peuple*—richly annotated.

The critiques of the Enlightenment and the oppositional stances of men of

letters in the nineteenth century toward society define the theme of the last installment of the show, "Resistance," as it is proclaimed on the first page of the first issue of the anti-occupation *Bulletin of the National Committee for the Public Wellbeing* (1940). A parade of cultural heroes and their artifacts marches before us, triumphantly: Stendahl, Flaubert, Hugo, Zola, Proust, Malraux, Genet, Sartre, and so on. In the nineteenth century, according to Florence Callu, the Romantics were the first to begin keeping their papers and manuscripts as integral parts of their work. Many gained a special *gloire* of their own by presenting them to the nation: Hugo, Renan, the Goncourt brothers, Flaubert, Zola, and Anatole France, among others. Although the relationship between culture and power becomes a bit vexed in this part of the exhibit, the catalogue entries still seem satisfied with a unitary notion of French culture.

It is possible that a catalog like this deserves an anthropologist rather than a librarian as a reviewer. *Creating French Culture* might be appropriately subtitled "How the French Think about Themselves." This is not meant as a criticism, for there is much to be learned about both French culture and French habits of mind in this handsome volume. Indeed, the perspective is intrinsic to this type of an exhibit, so unabashedly self-celebratory. But it will not convert those who view exhibits warily as occasions for uncritical promotion or, worse, as ideological propaganda. Yet, even the most jaded exhibit-goer will be hard put to resist the lure of the individual artifacts: the Master of Boucicaut's miniatures of Charles VI and their scenes of daily life at the turn of the fifteenth century; the magnificent fifteenth-century miniature opening a translation of Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* epitomizing the Eden story; a manuscript of Bude's *De l'institution du prince* from the early six-

teenth century, with Bude flanked by Mercury and Philology; a book on the rivers of Europe, written and printed by the young Louis XV, presented as a gift to his paramour, Mme. de Pompadour; Appolinaire's copy of Sonia Delaunay's striking refiguration of Blaise Cendrars's *La Prose du transsiberian* . . . from earlier in this century; and so on. If there is power in this catalogue, it surely resides in the artifacts it records. Whatever one thinks of the spin of the authors, the books, manuscripts, and commentary of *Creating French Culture* are well worth a tour.—*Michael Ryan, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia*

Hernon, Peter, and Ellen Altman. *Service Quality in Academic Libraries*. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1996. 187p. \$24.50, paper. ISBN 1-56750-210-5. LC 95-42989.

The original work in this book is included in chapters 4 through 7 and three appendices, a mere eighty pages or so. Based on focus group and personal interviews with librarians, and focus group interviews with students in library and information science, two questionnaires relating to quality of service were developed for use with patrons of academic libraries. After pretesting and modification, these instruments were applied in three academic libraries, with 220 participants (almost exclusively undergraduate or graduate students) completing one or another of the surveys. The development of the instruments and the results of the surveys are presented in chapter 4 (eighteen pages). The final instruments themselves are given in two appendices (four pages). Chapter 5, in eight pages, discusses how libraries can survey their customers, including the administering of survey instruments and sampling aspects.

The first questionnaire (appendix A) asks patrons, mostly through bipolar scales, for their opinions about the library they use. The second (appendix

B) gives users twenty-five statements about the library and its services, to which they are to respond on a 1–5 scale of importance.

There is nothing really new in such customer satisfaction surveys and, frankly, this reviewer feels they have been done better elsewhere (Chapter 11 of Baker and Lancaster's 1991 *Measurement and Evaluation of Library Services* gives several examples). Moreover, how can one take too seriously a survey that ranges from the *content* of information obtained from the library to the cleanliness of the drinking fountains? It is also doubtful that library users can really respond meaningfully to some of the points (e.g., "The information you get from library books and periodicals is accurate") and at least one of the questions is completely ambiguous: "Library staff understand the information for which you are looking" presumably means "Library staff understand what you are looking for," which is quite different from the point as stated.

Chapters 1, 2, 3, 8, and 9 are mostly "fluff." Chapter 1 takes fourteen pages to tell us that evaluation should be customer oriented. Probably few librarians would disagree with this, although they may not put their agreement into practice. Chapter 2 is a general discussion of evaluation principles and performance measures. In this, the authors attempt to clarify terminology but, in the opinion of this reviewer, only muddy the waters. For example, they try to make a distinction between "outcomes" and "impacts" but fail to do so clearly (it is doubtful that a meaningful distinction exists), and they are completely wrong in their attempt to distinguish cost-effectiveness from cost-benefit approaches.

Chapter 3 is a discussion on service quality "as reflected in the literature." The authors draw examples from other fields, mostly government and busi-