

Hiner on Edgington (2017)

Edgington, Erin E. *Fashioned Texts and Painted Books: Nineteenth-Century French Fan Poetry*. University of North Carolina Press, 2017, pp. 209, ISBN 978-1469635774

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The nineteenth-century lady's fan is a polyvalent object existing at the crossroads of multiple disciplinary fields. A decorative art object and functional fashion accessory, it belongs at once to material culture and fashion history, to literary studies and art history. As her layered title suggests, Erin E. Edgington considers this object in its liminality: the fan as text "fashioned," most notably by poets, and also as painted, a crafted object akin to a luxury book. Beyond its ubiquitous association with the so-called frivolity of feminine fashion, the artistic or poetic fan, Edgington argues, should be understood as a literary and artistic achievement similar to the work of fin-de-siècle Symbolist poets or the paintings of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists.

The book is divided into three parts, each containing three chapters of varying length and addressing the fan in different and overlapping contexts. Part one focuses primarily on the historical, art historical, and social status of the object within nineteenth-century French culture. The first chapter offers a history of the fan with particular attention to the late nineteenth-century fashion historian, bibliophile, journalist, and collector, Octave Uzanne, examining how his "historical" rendering is inflected by a mythology that often recycles unverified sources and reinforces the fan's identity as a feminized tool of coquetry of Eastern origins. Chapter two takes up the visual dimensions of the fan and traces its dual track as both represented object and medium for artistic production by canonical artists from Ingres to Impressionists such as Manet, Cassatt, Renoir, Degas, and Tissot, among others. As representations in artworks, fans are indicators of social status or simply *effets de réel*, underscoring the modernity of the material and offering details of dress and circumstance that help construct the feminine subject in many paintings. The author describes fans painted by Impressionist artists and aims to recuperate their importance as artworks, often dismissed, she contends, by art historians. The painted fan was both a commodity produced by artists to supplement their income, and an aestheticized object, challenging to paint and demanding skill and imagination. Lengthier discussion of lesser-known *éventailistes*, such as Louise Abbéma and Madeleine Lemaire, both mentioned, would have been welcome, and may have provided further insight into the standard narrative of feminization and thus marginalization of certain artistic genres and on the stigma attached to art as commodity. Finally, the author examines the "commemorative" function of fans, offering discussions of fan construction and production, their increased commodification as mass-produced objects, and their personalization as collectible autographed fans.

Parts two and three shift to the fan as poetic medium and deal with Mallarmé's and Claudel's forays into "fan poetry" and the links between textual, visual, and material production. Each of these two sections is notably shorter than part one and could logically have been joined as one part examining the fan as poetic object and medium. Such a streamlining would have been efficient, given that many of the chapters are quite short (chapter seven is only seven pages long), and both "parts" focus on the literary mode of the inscribed fan. Part two centers on Mallarmé's *éventails*, "a series of short poetic texts initially inscribed directly on painted folding fans" (95). Edgington prefaces this analysis with a chapter on Mallarmé's short-lived venture as director of *La Dernière Mode*, a fashion journal to which he contributed for four months in 1874. She suggests that the journal goes beyond the commercial function of such fashion discourse and serves as a "precursor" for his *éventails* work, a valorizing response to the "de-poeticizing of fashion in the last quarter" of the century (97). Chapter five then turns to the *éventails* proper and discusses the formal and thematic aspects of these works, while chapter six explores the relationship between the *éventails* and Mallarmé's famous poem of 1897 "Un Coup de Dés," of which the visual unconventionality and typographical experimentation is foreshadowed by the fan poems.

The book's final section focuses on the fan poetry of Paul Claudel, beginning with a short chapter establishing links between Mallarmé's poetic practice and themes and those of Claudel's *Cent Phrases pour éventail*, composed in the early twentieth century. This graphic work combines haiku and calligraphy and is the product of collaborations with several Japanese artists: Edgington's chapter on "plastic poetry" is concerned with material aspects of production and the formal techniques at play in the poetry. Finally, she concludes her discussion of Claudel with a look at the "text-object" of the luxury book in its published and collectible form. A short final chapter argues against the marginalization of the fan as "mere" fashion accessory and calls for its elevation to art object.

This rich discussion is hampered by some limitations that could have been addressed in the editorial phase to make the book more successful. As mentioned above, consolidating structure would have eliminated repetition and provided a more seamless

organization and thus a stronger argument. Also, it is indisputable that “minor” genres in both literature and painting are often overlooked. This book itself constitutes the corrective. Thus, it would perhaps be more powerful to make a single broad claim for re-evaluation at the outset of the book and not repeat it throughout. Finally, for a book so concerned with visual culture and materiality, it is a pity to find only two black-and-white illustrations tucked away at the end. This is likely a press constraint, but readers may be disappointed, particularly in chapters dealing with visual and material culture, to find no illustrations of paintings or objects.

In spite of these shortcomings, this volume has much to offer a variety of scholars, and its author demonstrates an agile and interdisciplinary mind. Those interested in the less-studied poetry of Mallarmé and Claudel will find close analyses of poems and sustained readings. Those concerned with the representation and history of fashion will find material concerning the fan’s place within those fields. Scholars of material culture, and, in particular, the luxury book will find useful analogies in the discussions of luxury “poeticized” fan. The ambition to work at the crossroads of literature, art, fashion, and material culture is laudable, and the fan, so richly significant in the nineteenth century, merits the attention Edgington gives it.

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