

Knowing the World through Rococo Ornamental Prints

MICHAEL YONAN

Rococo art revels in complexity, sensuality, indeterminacy, and seductive surfaces, qualities that are conveyed in the decorative arts through the shell-like *rocaille* shapes that give the style its name. Rococo design was more than just an art of decoration, however, and therefore more than simply one style among many in the history of art. Its forms reveal the structures that bind object, image, and the viewer's eyes and body in complex ways, making it a kind of metastyle, one in which the ontological conditions of viewer and object are investigated. It was the German art historian Hermann Bauer who first described rococo ornament in this way; he saw it as supplemental both to art and to the observer's physical experience of looking at art. He described ornament as a mediating element, a point that the art historian Oleg Grabar later explored in a more general study of ornament's effects.¹ This idea subsequently became the centerpiece of an important and influential article by Mimi Hellman.² In it, Hellman argued that eighteenth-century furniture was an active force in shaping eighteenth-century sociability, and further that furniture's design contributed to the creation of an elite subjectivity. For Hellman, as for Bauer and Grabar, rococo objects function as corporeal supplements that influence human behavior fundamentally. The beautiful mechanical table by Jean-François Oeben and Roger Vandercruse Lacroix now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (figure 1) is easy to understand as a decorative object and even perhaps a shaper of human behavior in Hellman's sense. But comprehending how its rococo ornamental elements interrogate human sensory boundaries may be more challenging for a modern



FIGURE 1. Mechanical table, Jean-François Oeben and Roger Vander-cruise Lacroix, c. 1761–63. (Jack and Belle Linsky Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1982.60.61)

beholder to grasp. How did shells, flowers, and curlicues become a conduit for critiquing human perception in Enlightenment Europe?

This essay shall attempt to answer that question by examining how rococo decorative art transformed the art/nature duality at the center of early modern European aesthetics into a critique of bodily sensation. Viewing the rococo in this way has the advantage of bypassing much twentieth-century prejudice against ornament as something inessential and unnecessary. It also has the effect of claiming for rococo decorative arts a singular importance in the formation of modern taste. Modern viewers typically turn to paintings to understand early modern stylistic developments, since painting remains the privileged art-historical medium for explicating art's theoretical underpinnings. Yet for all its beauty, rococo painting is at a remove from the decorative forms found in rococo architecture and decorative arts like the Oeben-Lacroix table. The rococo's theoretical basis is better approached through the medium of ornamental prints. Rococo prints offered more than simple images of flourishes later reproduced in works of

decorative art; they engage in a protoscientific examination of perception in the material world, a space of visual play in which the possibilities of art were explored. Several art historians have recognized that these prints form the theoretical basis of rococo art generally; Alastair Laing and Marianne Roland Michel have each noted that lacking an eighteenth-century textual defense of rococo art, these prints come closest to offering a theoretical investigation of its aesthetics.³ In asking viewers to approach representation with a specific critical mindset—indeed, by creating that mindset through the representational structures employed—rococo ornamental prints invited their beholders to assume diverse stances toward art and to the broader material world. Prints enabled those stances toward the world to be examined, imagined, transformed, and embraced.

To understand how rococo prints achieve this, I shall analyze a debate that took place between writers in Germany and France from 1740 to 1770, one in which the role of ornament in relation to human perception underwent scrutiny and where prints were the medium through which that discussion was articulated. We shall enter that debate through the writings of a somewhat obscure figure, the German architect Friedrich August Krubsacius (1718–1789). Krubsacius spent most of his career in the city of his birth, Dresden. In 1755, he became *Hofarchitekt* to the Saxon-Polish court and in 1764 professor of architecture at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts. For his hometown, he designed and built numerous noble residences, many unfortunately lost in the Allied bombings of 1945. More than for any single building, however, Krubsacius is remembered today primarily as a writer. He wrote plentifully about ancient architecture, publishing two treatises that reconstructed the appearance of Pliny the Younger's villa at Laurentum, near Rome, which he attempted to do with archaeological accuracy.⁴ More frequently cited is Krubsacius's pamphlet on ornamentation, titled *Thoughts on the Origin, Growth and Decline of Ornaments in the Fine Arts*, which was published in 1759.⁵ Art historians have long recognized this text's role in the history of the decorative arts, describing it as the first scholarly history of art oriented around objects and not images.⁶ In it, Krubsacius offers a history of ornamentation but combines it with lengthy commentary on what ornament does for the people who create and encounter it.

Let us begin by looking into how Krubsacius describes the beginnings of ornament. He claims that his goal is the redirection of German art after

a series of regrettable mistakes. In order to illustrate how far Germany had gone astray, Krubsacius concocts a Rousseauian pastoral Eden in prose, one in which art existed harmoniously both with nature and humankind. There, art perfectly fulfilled human needs by accentuating it in exactly the correct ways. Expanding on the French theorist Marc-Antoine Laugier (1713–1769), whose influential *Essai sur L'Architecture* preceded his treatise by five years, Krubsacius describes ancient shepherds and hunters living contentedly in simple dwellings made of trees, branches, and leaves. This description draws on the famous primitive hut that Laugier used to imagine architecture emerging from the proportions found in nature (figure 2).

When the early shepherds moved into these simple abodes, they noticed that they were less beautiful than the untouched spaces of nature itself. To correct this, they adorned their interiors with fruits and floral blooms strung across their walls, and in doing that, ornamental decoration was born.⁷ Implicit in this story are several claims important for Krubsacius's readers to notice. The first is that there is such a thing as "natural" ornament; this is an ornament that derives recognizably from natural forms and mimics their appearance. His story places the origins of ornamentation quite literally in organic supplements to human spaces. Ornament therefore has a basis in nature, and specifically in nature's things; although it can be abstract to varying degrees, it is not automatically a nonpictorial kind of art. The second claim is that ornament is a necessary aspect of human experience. We are far indeed from the mindset of modern artists and architects who wished buildings to be streamlined to achieve a rarified functionalism. Human beings have an essential, even primeval urge to decorate their surroundings. Finally, ornament is to architecture as fruits and flowers are to trees: they adorn and beautify them, but they also play the biological role of reproduction, of creating the new. That generative component is something that Krubsacius found troubling even as it was unavoidable, as I shall show in a moment. I would add that although Krubsacius described the urge for decoration as a universal human condition, he was also quick to remark that not all societies responded to that urge with equal skill. It was the ancient Greeks who codified simple ornamental practices into written laws and from there into the classical orders, which formed the foundation for the entire subsequent history of European architecture. Most cultures outside of Europe, Krubsacius believed, never progressed beyond simple adornments in their primitive shelters.



FIGURE 2. Frontispiece to Marc-Antoine Laugier's *Essai sur L'Architecture*, Charles-Dominique-Joseph Eisen, 1755. (Special Collections and Rare Books, University of Missouri Libraries)

Copyright © 2020. University of Virginia Press. All rights reserved.

Art historians have sometimes sought to characterize Krubsacius as an antiornament crusader, which the above brief summary suggests is too simple a judgment. He was not opposed to decoration and certainly did not banish it from his own designs. Rather, Krubsacius took issue with specific kinds of ornament and more precisely with the ways those ornamental forms relate to their human viewers visually and, one might add, supplementally. Here we approach the parts of his argument that engage with the corporeal and psychological effects of ornament. Krubsacius lamented that around 1720 something occurred to cause European decorative styles to go profoundly awry.⁸ To blame was the force that many eighteenth-century German writers identified as the source of aesthetic and moral degeneracy: France. Krubsacius's ideas fit within a much broader German Enlightenment project of critiquing German art by decrying its reliance upon French precedents.⁹ Rococo design was created, he claims, by a small group of French artists who wished to display their powers of imagination, the rarity of their materials, and their skills at good design, and the most prominent among them was the architect and silversmith Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier (1695–1750). Krubsacius credited Meissonnier specifically with producing objects that both possessed a beautiful appearance and showed off his creative powers.¹⁰ But Meissonnier intended his objects only for a small group of elite French women, claimed the German writer, and although he never names Madame de Pompadour explicitly, he certainly has her and women of her status in mind. Once these elite women expressed their fondness for Meissonnier's art, it became the talk of Paris, and here Krubsacius reminds readers that this happened because the French are always slaves to fashion.¹¹

When this Parisian-born artistic novelty then traveled east to Germany, it met with the German predilection for copying foreign trends, with the resulting hybrid an aesthetic catastrophe. A massive and regrettable proliferation of bad Meissonnier-inspired art spread like wildfire through Germany, declared Krubsacius. German art lovers and artists were so attracted to it that they failed to judge properly what they borrowed. They absorbed it all and in so doing made German art more French than French art itself.¹² If the Germans really understood art, Krubsacius complained, they would be more selective in what they mimicked, and if that ever occurred, “foreigners and critics would not laugh at our German designs.”¹³

It might be tempting to dub Krubsacius yet another frustrated art critic propounding aesthetic ideals in opposition to contemporary tastes and the

marketplace's power. Rococo art was fashionable in eighteenth-century Europe because it enjoyed elite patronage, was beautiful to look at, and had the cachet of the new that has come to characterize avant-garde art ever since. It partly did this through its evocation of different artistic traditions like the Islamic and the Chinese, which it did not strictly copy, but whose ornamental effusiveness it evoked. Yet Krubsacius also locates ornament in relation to the body, and this is where he turns to ornamental prints. He recounts an imaginary conversation between himself and two people, one an earnest connoisseur and the other a slave to fashion, and he centers this dialogue on the social function of ornament. He poses the following rhetorical question: Is it necessary to decorate an object with unnatural monstrosities à la rococo? A loaded question for sure. The connoisseur asks in turn what the rococo ornaments are supposed to be. The fashion slave answers heartily with a string of terms: "Well of course it's *rocaille*, *grotesque*, *arabesque*, *à la chinoise*, *en goût baroque* [*sic*]; in short, it's fashionable!"¹⁴ What a terrible answer that is, laments Krubsacius, especially from a self-proclaimed lover of art. He takes this opportunity to reveal what rococo ornament really is and not just how it looks. He appends a mock rococo print to his text, one made to his specification by the Dresden-based printmaker Dorothea Philipp (1721–1791). It depicts a rococo cartouche (figure 3). Helpfully provided for his text's readers is a key that corresponds to a printed list in his text. What is this represented object, exactly? Krubsacius puts it thus: "Es sey ein Mischmasch." A mishmash of reeds and straw, bones, pottery shards, shavings, feather brooms, wilted flowers, shattered shells, rags, feathers, wood shavings, cut off bits of hair, stones, fish scales, fish bones, animal tails, and "trendy-looking dragons, snakes, and other vermin who mostly look alike and resemble bunches of sticks."¹⁵

Krubsacius humorously alerts us at this moment to his belief that rococo ornament consisted of a lot of nonsense. And one can understand what spurred him to arrive at that conclusion, since rococo ornamentation often includes putti, flowers, shells, and other such things that are not usually bearers of profound artistic meaning. Yet his cartouche is not simply satire. Through it Krubsacius broaches a quite serious problem about the process of knowing the world sensorially, the way in which the viewing subject engages in art as a conduit to accessing nature. The print represents an ornamental form that is beautiful in shape and composition, but is composed of garbage. It therefore attracts the eye and draws the beholder in



FIGURE 3. Frontispiece to Friedrich August Krubsacius's *Gedanken von dem Ursprunge, Wachstume, und Verfalle der Verzierungen in den schönen Künsten*, Dorothea Philipp, 1759. (Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen, Germany)

but misrepresents the status of the objects it offers for view. The objects he lists are worthless, none of intrinsic interest, but their transformation into ornament makes them seem more impressive than they actually are. This is therefore an art that fools, an art of deception and dissimulation, and Krubsacius worries that without his explanation, some readers will misunderstand his intentions in printing it. “Our eyes are already so accustomed to this sort of thing,” he laments, “that we don’t even notice it; and as proof of that, won’t many people take this given example to be a new style and praise it, only thereafter to be embarrassed when they realize that they took this trash to be decoration?”¹⁶

There is a great deal of insight embedded in this moment of ornamental criticism. There are actually three points of critique at work in it. The first targets the inappropriate borrowing of French design and the naïve application of it to German art, which indicates a belief that nations should

produce art that corresponds to their collective characters. The second is the inability of art lovers to distinguish good from bad, which Krubsacius believes is so underdeveloped that it hinders their ability to discern fine objects from junk, and not just when depicted in art. The ability to judge is presented not only in highbrow terms of aesthetic differentiation but also in the ability to distinguish value in everyday material goods, the broader material world mentioned earlier. And finally, there is the rhetoric of the trick, the work of art that looks good but is actually not. This contrasts with the more penetrating, focused, and discerning gaze of the connoisseur, who is shrewd enough to distinguish between things that are beautiful and those that are worthless.

With that last point, we arrive at what Krubsacius really disliked about rococo ornament: the degree of representational and semantic autonomy it allows those who encounter it. It has become commonplace to claim that rococo art invests its viewers with an authoritative role.¹⁷ The beholder is overtly engaged in the perceptual structures of rococo design. The literature here is sophisticated, but simply put, the indeterminate forms of rococo art dislocate viewers' perception and stimulate their imagination, placing and re-placing them in a constantly shifting environment in which the work of art changes every time it is encountered. Those perceptual transformations can extend even to the basic apprehension of form. Achieving this effect required rococo artists to generate great visual complexity, which they did principally in two ways. One was to blend natural and artificial forms, or pictorial and nonpictorial ones, into aesthetically pleasing, beautifully crafted, but ultimately "unnatural" constructions. The other, especially prominent in Germany, was to complicate the spatial incongruities possible in rococo design. German artists especially like the idea of rococo ornament as a frame, which is why German ornamental printmakers gravitated notably toward cartouches.¹⁸ Rococo art therefore is about more than simply multiplying ornamental forms into abundance; it is about destabilizing rigid divisions between presentation and representation, as well as between the conception and perception of things. In doing this, the playful blending and optical dislocations one finds in rococo art become not just a visual game but an essential component of the aesthetic experience intended to activate the beholder's imagination. This overt activation can be traced through nearly all rococo art, but it plays a particularly obvious role in the rococo ornamental print.

What I would suggest is that this activation process is not simply an aesthetic one, one limited to a discrete realm of experience that falls under the rubric of “art.” It is an attempt to explore a broader understanding of all matter, one extendable to the entire material world and accessed through encounters with objects. The eighteenth century, that age of rational thought, was also an era of fascination with things both natural and manufactured. These things were sometimes so compelling that interest in them approached the irrational. Confronting nature through direct observation, categorizing newly encountered cultures, copying sculpture from the antique, or visiting the site of a miracle all involved encounters between people and the material world. It is therefore no accident that eighteenth-century philosophy concerned itself to a great degree with the issue of how the mind apprehends matter. Philosophers debated whether matter actually existed or if it only seemed to exist, being nothing more than the product of our mental capacity for illusion. The senses’ role in ascertaining matter was likewise scrutinized extensively. Many, following Locke, understood sense as the interface between the mind and the world, but following from that supposition grew troubling questions that addressed the fundamental nature of reality. In a world of purely sensate knowledge, what is a mind? Is there a higher force (a deity?) whose presence might explain the forms that matter took? Philosophers produced divergent answers to these questions, but in all the role of matter in our perception of the world was a nagging problem, one tantalizingly appealing but ultimately impossible to solve. Denis Diderot dubbed eighteenth-century materialism “that most seductive philosophy,” since it broached precisely how knowledge is created out of things and teased the philosopher with the promise of a clarity that it could never actually reveal.¹⁹

That perceptual clarity of the material world is exactly what Krubsacius strove to emphasize in his analysis, but he did so against the background of actual art making in eighteenth-century Europe that delighted in visual and semantic complexity, what one might call a perceptual nonclarity. This was exemplified by the artist he names in his critique: Meissonnier. Krubsacius and Meissonnier make for a fascinating comparison, since they are on opposite ends of the eighteenth-century critical spectrum about ornament and its functions. Meissonnier’s imagery gleefully engages with exactly the processes that Krubsacius derides. Meissonnier published many prints in his career, but his most suggestive and cryptic appear in his *Livre de legumes*,

or Book of vegetables, published in 1745.²⁰ This is not a collection of ornamental designs, at least not in the usual sense. It contains no depictions of tureens, wall sconces, mirrored rooms, or any of the other things one finds in more typical eighteenth-century ornamental books. Instead, Meissonnier gives us six plates that illustrate a series of random objects arranged into artful compositions. Many of the things shown are also edible, which renders the book at least obliquely about food, which hints at some of the concerns about the preparation and reuse of foodstuffs that Diane Purkiss examines in her essay for this book. In these composite comestibles, Meissonnier asks his viewers to ponder the ways in which we know the world through recognizing how we perceive things in art.

To see how that happens, let us look at one of the book's six plates, the fifth (figure 4). As with all of them, there is no explanatory text.²¹ Instead, we are confronted with two bunches of celery upon which rest a dead rabbit and two pigeons. To view this picture as a simple representation of objects would involve naming these components, as I have just done, and perhaps asking what is the purpose behind depicting them in this way. The rabbit and birds are the products of the hunt, no doubt, and could be combined with the celery to make a tasty *lapin à la cocotte* for dinner. It is that approach, identifying things and naming what they are, that critics like Krubsacius believed viewers should do when looking at works of art. But surely Meissonnier is interested in more than just the subject matter of this picture; he is equally if not more interested in the manner through which the represented objects are made apparent to us. The celery bunches have arranged themselves into an artfully balanced X, which, when looked at askance, may for some observers assume humanoid characteristics. The animals likewise let themselves be identified easily, but the more one looks, the less sure one is of their boundaries. Edges blend into each other as the birds' feathers transform into the rabbit's fur and from there into feathery celery leaves, blurring distinctions that in normal human experience remain apparently discrete. Look carefully and you might just see the outline of a pig, with a snout and dangling forelegs, but doing so requires you to unsee the rabbit and birds. They are all, to our modern minds, completely different things, but Meissonnier asks us to imagine them as linked materially in some mysterious way. On a more scientific level one might propose, as has James Trilling, that underlying rococo aesthetics is the presumption of a common material essence to the world and a concomitant belief in spontaneous natural transformation, a

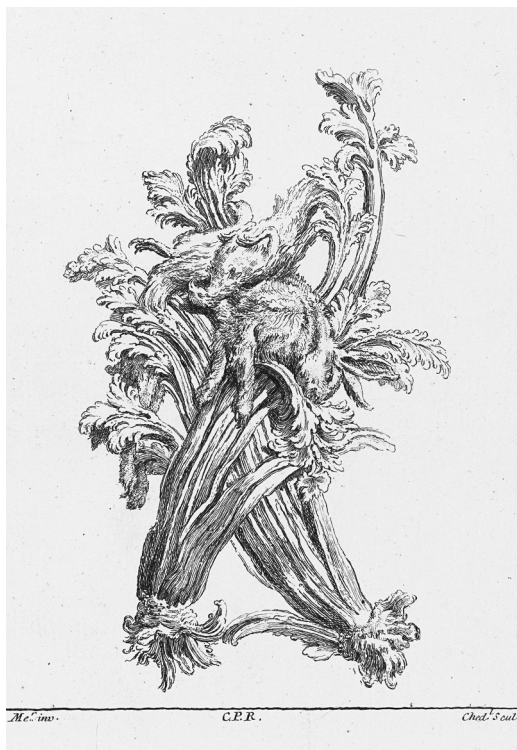


FIGURE 4. *Livre de legumes*,
Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier,
1745, plate 5. (Rijksmu-
seum, Amsterdam)

pre-Darwinian view of matter that imagines nature endlessly morphing into new things.²² For Meissonnier, those transformations exist not only as perceptual shifts but also material ones, and indeed the line between the object represented and the way we see it is difficult to draw. The sensitive viewer aware of the principles of art will find more to see, and more to imagine what he or she sees, as he or she looks at this image over time. In stimulating new ideas, and creating by extension new life, Meissonnier's print suggests that dead matter can produce life, an attitude that Jayne Lewis argues was applied to John Milton's hair by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers in her contribution to this book.

I would propose then that the *Livre* is concerned precisely with the issue of material perception. The most cryptic of its images, and in some respects the most telling, is the final one (figure 5). In this print, we find a branch from what appears to be an oak tree, with the wooded stem at bottom and the curved edges of the leaves clearly articulated. This is not an edible plant but rather a pure representation of natural materiality, a tree branch of



FIGURE 5. *Livre de legumes*,
Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier,
1745, plate 6. (Photo:
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam)

the kind that can be seen in virtually any European forest. Resting atop this branch are two birds. The curves of the birds' necks blend into the leafy foliage beneath them, and once again the precise boundaries between plant and animal are hard to differentiate, as is the distinction between the picture's randomness, the apparent nonchalance with which these objects appear before us, and the artistic manipulation of them required in order to make this image balanced and pleasing. Like its predecessor, this is the apparently involuntary creation of artful design through the forms of nature. I see in this image the purest statement about how viewers perceive nature in art that the eighteenth century ever produced. In looking at it, viewers are left with serious and ultimately unanswerable questions: is it Meissonnier's manipulation of these objects into art that makes the image compelling, or is it our willingness as viewers, our power as spectators, that enables us to find artistry in these extremely basic things? These questions are never resolved, neither in Meissonnier's *Livre* nor in rococo aesthetics more broadly. To resolve them would be to collapse the semantic potential

of the rococo into straightforward pictorial terms. That is what Krubsacius wanted and what rococo artists like Meissonnier deliberately fought against. I would add that fighting against such semantic closure ensured that rococo art would operate as a creative supplement to the human body precisely through its muddling of sensory sureties.

This then raises the question of how such aesthetic indeterminacy functioned when applied to actual objects, as opposed to pictures in prints. Rococo prints like Meissonnier's were not intended to be copied literally when artists turned to make actual things.²³ No eighteenth-century commode or table displays the celery, rabbit, and bird combination from plate 5 in a one-to-one transfer. Instead, rococo ornamental prints are better understood as springboards for creativity in artists, opportunities for them to imagine new decorative possibilities, and they also stimulated the senses of those collectors who purchased them for the purely fanciful enjoyment that came from looking at them. Some of that visual pleasure then carried over into the creation of real things. A pair of light sconces by an unknown French artist, dating from the 1740s, supplies an example of how that transferal worked (figure 6). In them, natural forms both floral and vegetal combine with purely abstract elements, which makes pinpointing exactly which shapes correspond to which representational elements impossible.



FIGURE 6. Pair of wall lights, unknown French maker, gilt bronze, 1745–49. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. (Image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program)

They do not resemble Meissonnier's designs exactly but capture in more general ways the associative energy found in his prints. In the context of an eighteenth-century interior, such objects would not be studied closely as one could do with a print, nor were they observed with the careful eye of a modern museum visitor. Eighteenth-century elites perceived them peripherally as part of the experience of being in an elaborately decorated space.²⁴ In encountering them, different people would notice different things, and the objects' construction is intended to allow quick associative processes to occur without closing off the potential for new and unexpected references. Hanging these sconces on a wall would do more than simply decorate a surface or illuminate an interior; they would supplement the human environment with an unresolved tension between art and nature and thereby provoke the inhabitants of that environment to sense a world beyond that perceived objectively.

We can see this as well in the table with which this essay began. It was designed by Oeben, who was German-born but active in Paris, where his atelier flourished and became one of the period's most respected and admired cabinetmaking enterprises. Oeben died before completing the table; his nephew Lacroix oversaw its final construction in 1763. Perhaps it is noteworthy that this object emerges from combined German and French sensibilities, which parallels the broader German-French discussion of rococo aesthetics that involved both Meissonnier and Krubsacius. Furniture similar to it filled the interior residences of Europe's continental elites in the eighteenth century; this one was intended for none other than Madame de Pompadour herself, one of the "small group of elite women" whom Krubsacius blamed for the rococo's regrettable popularity. The table places the art/nature tension inherent to rococo design into direct contact with an actual person, and in doing so enforces precisely the kind of embodied interaction, however peripheral or subliminal, built into domestic activities such as reading, writing, conversing, and socializing. It becomes a silent mediator of the self and its boundaries, an interlocution woven into the fabric of functional objects. It is not a stable mediator, however; the rococo ornaments on it—the gilded bronze trim and marquetry inlay—repeatedly disrupt a coherent sense of self and place for its user. Moreover, it perfectly illustrates the paradox of rococo art's materiality that Krubsacius and Meissonnier approached from different points of view. The table is assembled from hundreds of small pieces of precious wood. In one sense these are rare

and valuable, since most derive from tropical trees harvested in equatorial regions of the globe and shipped to Europe at great effort and expense. But in another sense, they are simply chips of wood of little inherent utility. Krubsacius would have dismissed them as shavings, part of the worthless junk that went into making his mock cartouche. The same could be said of the gilded accents added to the table's edges and legs; they are both precious and useless at the same time. All of its components are also natural products transformed through human artistry into artful constructions that bring their owners into contact with a partially suppressed but ever-present nature. It is only through Oeben and Lacroix's artistry that these materials attain their full value. And it is only in choosing to recognize that artistry and appreciate it that the table's users apprehend its full significance.

The table can never escape the reality that, however beautiful it is, on a fundamental level it is assembled from bits of nothing, as is all rococo art. Seeing the value in the artful transformation of that nothing into something is part of the table's purpose, as is conveying something beyond a one-dimensional engagement with it. If we imagine Madame de Pompadour writing at this table, we can think of the interactivity that existed between her body and the transformed natural materials and the representationally natural shapes found in its rococo ornament; it would have supplemented her body in decorative ways and integrated its transmuted organic elements into her epistolary practices specifically and her social identity generally. In making this claim, I follow in the footsteps of Dena Goodman, who has recognized the role of writing desks and cabinets (*secrétaires*) in the formation of a modern gendered sense of self for the women who owned them.²⁵ Desks and cabinets are material metaphors for the surfaces and interiors of the self. Taking that idea a step further and approaching this relationship through the lens of interdisciplinary material culture studies, it could be said that Oeben's table is in some capacity materially alive, that it retains some of the organic vitality of its woods and metals, but it filters that vitality through the self-conscious artifice of rococo, which tempers and complicates it. In using it for its intended purpose, Madame de Pompadour became a bio-organic hybrid of human, nature, and art, and it is precisely rococo aesthetics that made that possible.

We can push these observations a little bit further into a broader understanding of how art relates to those who encounter it. That sense of complex interactivity is not something unique to the rococo but is a specific type

of user/spectator engagement that has recurred in multiple manifestations across the history of art. Rococo aesthetics present an eighteenth-century version of what the cubists would later explore through fractured points of view and what postmodern artists examine today through playful semantic bricolage: the mixing of far-flung fragmentary things into surprising, appealing, novel, yet unstable visual experiences. That said, rococo art is not actually a mixing of dissimilar things, at least not consistently; there is a logic at play in rococo constructions that renders them more unified and balanced than either a cubist collage or a postmodern mashup. That logic is the connectivity of rococo formal language, be it purely abstract connections or in pictorial elisions. Rococo forms always connect, sometimes in their pictorial content and sometimes in formal blendings. Meissonnier's proto-rococo hunt mixture is actually thematically totally coherent, but the will to see that coherency and accord it meaning lies in the interrogative power of the beholder. Krubsacius critiques the rococo as an art of nonsense and pointless mixing, which is what the print by Philipp attempts to convey. We have seen that this is not what the rococo does: it is an art of perception in which the mind adjusts in relation to ever-shifting combinations of matter. Philipp's print seems to critique the rococo, but actually it reifies its basic qualities, since the thematic coherency of garbage holds it together. Krubsacius's critique therefore fails: in order to mock the rococo, he and Philipp needed to engage exactly the kind of representational complexity that the style celebrates. I might add that all critiques of the rococo will likewise fail, since its pictorial vocabulary is committed precisely to evading specific meanings by generating new ideas perceptually. Rococo ornamentation invites—indeed revels in—the ruptures, discontinuities, and mixtures that challenge a simple unidirectional formula of human perception.

This brings me to my conclusion, which will be to suggest that representation in general—all representation, be it in a written text, a sculpture, or a film—interacts with its observers in a rococo-like perceptual process. All art, whatever its appearance, is encountered in changing conditions, be they changes in setting or venue or filtered through shifts in the observer's psychological state over time. We experience the world as continuous and coherent but also on another level as fragmented and erratic. That is a tension not always acknowledged in European art, which often strives for coherent ideals, but rococo art attempts to keep viewers aware of how inconsistent life can be. This means that the semantic openness of rococo

design comes closer to acknowledging our actual perception of reality than does a seemingly straightforward representational image that superficially “looks real.” Rococo art supplements our imagination by acknowledging the fragmentary yet seemingly whole experience of perceiving the world.

There are major consequences to this realization. One is that taste can no longer be a quality inherent to art; it is a process of suggestion and manipulation that rococo ornament unmasks as perpetually unstable. It further brings to the surface the shaky basis upon which we can claim to know anything, be it art or not. Rococo design coheres just enough to forestall the nihilism that such a realization might provoke, the implied death borne by matter that no longer bears any meaning. It is less that we can never know the material world and more that the process of looking forever recasts and redefines that knowledge anew based on our immediate position as subjects in time and space. Knowing the material world is never completed but is brought about repetitively through perceiving and re-perceiving. In that sense, rococo ornamental prints remind their viewers that knowledge is born somewhere in the interchanges among cognition, recognition, assessment, and reassessment.²⁶ Depending on how one understands art, and one’s belief system about what makes art good or bad, those reciprocities are either to be embraced and celebrated, as did Meissonnier, or criticized and feared, as did Krubsacius.

To these musings about the role of ornament as a perceptual stimulator and supplement I would add a final point. Rococo ornamental prints do not convey a single unified theory of art, one that correlates with a specific philosophical tradition, although the homologies between rococo ornament and materialist philosophy are rich, as this essay has tried to suggest. Rococo prints produce a philosophy, but by being visually articulated, its exact terms remain irreducible to a single explanatory system and are to some degree inscrutable. That is not a flaw; it is ultimately the rococo’s greatest strength, although it is infrequently acknowledged as such. To describe a theory of rococo in text would be to delimit it, to close off the potential of what it can do for its human interlocutors, and if anything, the lack of eighteenth-century treatises on rococo art is partly due to the inadequacy of language to outline its characteristics. Delimiting rococo art would require claiming that its terms apply to all people. That would close off the diverse range of responses that rococo ornament enables, as well as close off the potential of rococo art to suggest new responses beyond what its makers and original admirers could have anticipated.

With that before us, I would offer that it is the rococo, and not the more conventional choice of later eighteenth-century neoclassicism, that is the pictorial and ornamental style that corresponds most closely to the mindset of Enlightenment empiricist philosophy. Rococo art invites repeated testing of sensate knowledge; it is simultaneously observant and playful, earnest and satirical, insightful and improbable all at once. It is reciprocally critical of knowledge even as it seeks it, and in being that, it very much parallels the thought structures of eighteenth-century contemporaries like Voltaire and Swift. Rococo ornament invites its viewers to ponder how to understand the flow of things in and out of our chaotic experience of the world. That mishmash is called life.

Notes

This paper had its first airing at a symposium sponsored by the Caltech/Huntington Program in Materialities, Texts, and Images, in Pasadena, California. I am grateful to attendees of that event for discussion of these ideas, as I am to audiences at the 2015 International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies Quadrennial Congress on the Enlightenment, Rotterdam, at the University of Copenhagen, and at the University of Virginia.

1. Hermann Bauer, *Rocaille: Zur Herkunft und zum Wesen eines Ornament-Motivs* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1962), 61–63; Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
2. Mimi Hellman, “Furniture, Sociability and the Work of Leisure in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32.4 (Summer 1999): 415–45.
3. Alastair Laing, “French Rococo Engravings and the Diffusion of the Rococo,” in *Le stampe e la diffusione delle immagini e degli stili*, ed. Henri Zerner (Bologna: CLUEB, 1979), 109–27; Marianne Roland Michel, *Lajoie et l’Art Rocaille* (Neuilly-sur-Seine: Arthena, 1984), 131–36.
4. *Wahrscheinlicher Entwurff von des jüngern Plinius Landhause und Garten, Laurens genannt, nach Anziege seines 17ten Briefes des II. Buchs, an den Gallus* (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1760), and *Des Hofbaumeisters Friedrich August Krubsacius wahrscheinlicher Entwurff von des jüngern Plinius Landhause und Garten, in der toscanischen Gegend gelegen: nach Anzeige seines 6. Briefes des 5. Buches an den Apollinaris, durch Anmerkungen und Risse erklärt* (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1763).
5. Friedrich August Krubsacius, *Gedanken von dem Ursprunge, Wachstume, und Verfall der Verzierungen in den schönen Künsten*, (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1759). The text was also serialized that year in three editions of the

- periodical *Das Neueste aus der anmuthigsten Gelehrsamkeit*, also published by Breitkopf: “Kurze Untersuchung des Ursprungs der Verzierungen” (January 1759): 22–38; “Fortsetzung der neulich angefangenen Untersuchung vom Ursprunge der Verzierungen” (February 1759): 93–104; and “Beschluß der Untersuchung vom Ursprunge, Wachstume und Verfall der Verzierungen” (March 1759): 175–85.
6. E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, 2nd ed. (London: Phaidon, 1994), 25–26; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, “Antiquarianism, the History of Objects, and the History of Art before Winckelmann,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62.3 (2001): 539–40. See also Mario-Andreas von Lüttichau, *Die deutsche Ornamentkritik im 18. Jahrhundert* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1983), 100–115. Lüttichau reprints much of the pamphlet on pp. 139–55.
 7. Krubsacius, *Gedanken*, 14. “Denn da die Schäfer ihre Hütten von Baumstämmen, Ästen und Zweigen erbaueten, so wollten solche auch nachher auch verzieren. Die Blumen und Früchte waren das erste, wo ihnen die gütige Natur darboth.”
 8. Krubsacius, *Gedanken*, 30.
 9. Michael Yonan, “The Uncomfortable Frenchness of the German Rococo,” in *Rococo Echo: Art, Theory, and Historiography from Cochin to Coppola*, ed. Melissa Lee Hyde and Katie Scott (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2014), 33–51.
 10. Krubsacius, *Gedanken*, 6: “Seine Einbildungskraft, die gute Zeichnung, die feine Ausarbeitung, und die Kostbarkeit der Metalle, gab seinen neuen Geschöpfen ein herrliches Ansehen.”
 11. Krubsacius, *Gedanken*, 6: “Diese Neuigkeit durfte nur einigen vornehmen Frauen gefallen; so war es schon genug, daß ganz Paris sie für schön hielte. Wer diese Stadt kennet, der wird die Sklaverey der Mode so gut wissen, als ich, und mir hierinn Beyfall geben.”
 12. Krubsacius, *Gedanken*, 6: “es möchten einige deutsche Künstler, aus Liebe zur Neuigkeit, das Französische noch französischer machen wollen.” This criticism is based on Krubsacius’s belief that the German public has not been adequately trained in matters of taste.
 13. Krubsacius, *Gedanken*, 32–33: “Unsre Fabriken würden dadurch in bessere Aufnahme kommen, und Ausländer und Kenner würden nicht über unsre schöne Zeichnung und Erfindung lachen.” The full sentence also reveals that Krubsacius sees economic imparity as a dimension of Germany’s ornamental crisis.
 14. Krubsacius, *Gedanken*, 35.

15. Krubsacius, *Gedanken*, 36: “A) Schilf und Stroh B) Knochen C) Scherbeln D) Spänen E) Federwischen F) Verwelkten Blumen G) Zerbrochenen Muscheln H) Lappen I) Federn K) Hobelspänen L) Abgeschnittenen Haarlocken M) Steinen N) Fischschuppen O) Gräten P) Schwänzen Q) Besenreisig, voller neumodisch Drachen, Schlangen und andern Ungeziefer, denen es am meisten ähnlich sieht.”
16. Krubsacius, *Gedanken*, 37: “Unsere Augen sind schon so daran gewöhnet, daß wir es nicht wahrnehmen: und zum Beweise dessen, werden viele dieses gegebene Exempel, als eine neumodische Verzierung, loben, und sich alsdann schämen, daß sie dergleichen Auskehricht für eine Zierde gehalten haben?”
17. See Bauer, *Rocaille*, 58–63; Marian Hobson, *The Object of Art: The Theory of Illusion in Eighteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 42–61; Mary Sheriff, “Seeing Metamorphosis in Sculpture and the Decorative Arts,” in *Taking Shape: Finding Sculpture in the Decorative Arts*, ed. Martina Droth (Los Angeles: Getty, 2009), 158–65; and for an application to French painting Jennifer Milam, *Fragonard’s Playful Paintings: Visual Games in Rococo Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), chapter 2.
18. Laing, “Engravings,” 120.
19. The reference occurs in his anonymously published *Pensées sur l’interprétation de la nature* (1754), 76, in which he describes the philosopher Maupertuis (under his pseudonym Baumann) operating “dans l’espèce matérialisme plus séduisante.”
20. Its full title is *Livre de legumes Inventées et Dessinées par J. Mer*, which is a cleverer description of its contents than has often been recognized. Meissonnier is both the inventor and designer of the prints in it, but the title also implies that he is the designer of the vegetables—that is, the living forms—which they represent. See Peter Fuhling, *Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier: Un genie du rococo 1695–1750* (Turin: Allemandi, 1999), 2:321–23.
21. This is not quite the same thing as saying that the prints are text free; aside from the title page, each individual plate contains abbreviated references to Meissonnier and the printers, as well as the designation C.P.R., or *cum privilegio regis*, meaning with royal privilege. Yet none offers a textual key to the images’ content. This reliance on visuals alone to convey potential meaning is typical of rococo prints. See Valérie Kobi, “De la gravure d’ornement à la théorie de l’ornement. La gravure au trait et sa fonction théorique à la fin du XVIIIe siècle,” in *Ornamento, tra arte e design. Interpretazioni, percorsi e mutazioni nell’ottocento*, ed. Ariane Varela Braga (Basel: Schwabe, 2013), 21.

22. James Trilling, *Ornament: A Modern Perspective* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 162–63.
23. Here I diverge from the analysis of the *Livre's* function provided by Fuhring, *Meissonnier*, 2:323. My understanding is closer to that of Laing, “Engravings,” 114–15.
24. On lighting and perception in the rococo interior, see Mimi Hellman, “The Decorated Flame: Firedogs and the Tensions of the Hearth,” in Droth, *Taking Shape*, 176–85.
25. Dena Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 207–44. See also *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century: What Furniture Can Tell Us about the European and American Past*, ed. Dena Goodman and Kathryn Norberg (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1–9, 183–203.
26. Michel, *Lajoüe*, 131–36; Kobi, “De la gravure,” 26–27.