

UCLA

UCLA Historical Journal

Title

WILLA Z. SILVERMAN. The New Bibliopolis: French Book Collectors and the Culture of Print, 1880-1914. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7702m90j>

Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 22(1)

ISSN

0276-864X

Author

Everton, Elizabeth

Publication Date

2008

Peer reviewed

WILLA Z. SILVERMAN. *The New Bibliopolis: French Book Collectors and the Culture of Print, 1880-1914*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.

If, as Arden Reed has argued, modernism lies at the intersection of text and image, then the luxury books coveted and collected by the bibliophiles in Willa Z. Silverman's *The New Bibliopolis: French Book Collectors and the Culture of Print, 1880-1914* represent perhaps the pinnacle of early modernist creativity: visual art and text brought together in a harmonious whole, an art object in which the materiality of the media is the salient point.¹ Octave Uzanne and the other book collectors haunting the pages of Silverman's work would have relished such an association; like the artists they sought out to print, illustrate, and bind their books, these collectors saw themselves as engaged in a project to create modern books for a modern era.

Silverman's goals in *The New Bibliopolis* are two-fold: to shift the study of late nineteenth-century bibliophilia from an examination of the artists who created or illustrated luxury books to a study of the bibliophile as both creator and consumer of books; and to introduce a new way of writing the history of the book, moving away from the examination of the production and dissemination of books for a mass market. Employing Bourdieu's analysis of the 'market of symbolic goods,' Silverman argues that bibliophiles conceived of the luxury book market as a specialized space in which "profit and mass production were disdained...and commercial failure viewed as success" (7). This economic contrarianism went hand in hand with social and aesthetic elitism, as bibliophiles sought to produce the most desirable modern (in terms of aesthetic style, content, and production technology) books while narrowing the pool of people considered worthy of acquiring them. For these beautiful books – a beauty attested to by the copious illustrations – did not simply function as reading material but as avatars for their owner, embodying his wealth, his taste, his social standing, and his masculinity.

In shifting the focus from artists to collectors, Silverman complicates Carl Schorske's idea of a 'culture-maker' – the bibliophiles are as much "agents of cultural change" (140) as the artists with whom they collaborate. The thematic organization of the book highlights this slippage between collector and creator, transparently in the chapters on publishing and artistic collaboration, and implicitly elsewhere, as the bibliophiles struggle with the same *fin de siècle* concerns – the place of technology in art, the creation of a modern aesthetic, the shifting gender roles of the period – as their artist counterparts. With a few exceptions, however, the bibliophiles themselves remain obscure. Silverman alludes to generational as well as social ties between the bibliophiles, but she does not explore the implications of this generational identity beyond alluding to a desire to restore national prestige after the Franco-Prussian war. Nor does she identify any sort of political orientation among these men outside of a vague "elitism." Given the turbulent politics of Third Republic France and the political mobilization of artists, writers, and other culture producers at this time, this absence is surprising. Silverman's bibliophiles seem locked for the most part in *l'art pour l'art*, even while the artists explored the world around them. Nevertheless, Silverman's study is a provocative and compelling foray into the world of books and book collectors, with implications for the study of *fin de siècle* society and culture beyond the bounds of Bibliopolis.

Elizabeth Everton, University of California, Los Angeles

¹ See Arden Reed, *Manet, Flaubert, and the Emergence of Modernism: Blurring Genre Boundaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).