

TOUCHING WATELET: *L'ART DE PEINDRE* AND THE PERFORMANCE OF  
PHILOSOPHICAL MATERIALISM

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## ABSTRACT

Katherine P. Calvin: Touching Watelet: *L'Art de peindre* and the Performance of Philosophical Materialism  
(Under the direction of Mary Sheriff)

Writing on Claude-Henri Watelet's 1760 *L'Art de peindre*, Denis Diderot noted sneeringly: "If the poem belonged to me, I would cut out the vignettes, put them under glass, and throw the rest in the fire." Diderot imagines a violent dismemberment, touching Watelet's book with fingers, scissors, and fire. I too break apart *L'Art de peindre*. But rather than relegating it to blade and flame, I reassemble the whole and reframe its parts through the sense of touch. I analyze its engravings, poems, and related portrait by Jean-Baptiste Greuze each in relation to eighteenth-century conceptions of the artist's touch and philosophies of materialism. By using touch to tackle *L'Art de peindre* historically and theoretically, I argue Watelet's book performs Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's theories of combinatory imagination and sensorial knowledge—particularly, the "double experience" of touch—through its representation of both self and external world, Watelet and the art of painting.

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Writing on Claude-Henri Watelet's 1760 *L'Art de peindre*, Denis Diderot noted sneeringly: "If the poem belonged to me, I would cut out the vignettes, put them under glass, and throw the rest in the fire."<sup>1</sup> This imagined dismemberment of the book into its discrete, material components highlights the work's combinatory structure. This thesis echoes Diderot's engagement with Watelet's work through a framework of touch, first breaking it into pieces, then considering the reassembled whole. Focusing on materiality and form, I analyze piecemeal the engravings, poems, and Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *Portrait of Monsieur Watelet* in relation to eighteenth-century conceptions of the artist's touch and ask how Watelet, as an *amateur*, marked his authorial interventions. Returning to the complete work, I consider it an enactment or performance of contemporaneous theories of combinatory imagination and sensory knowledge, the latter explained by Étienne Bonnot de Condillac as the only way to "know" the external world. By using touch to tackle *L'Art de peindre* historically and theoretically, I argue that Watelet's book, as a material object, exemplifies Condillac's theory of sensorial knowledge—particularly, the "double experience" of touch—through its representation of both self and external world, Watelet and the art of painting.

### **Pieces and Portraits: *L'Art de peindre* as a Representation of the (Fragmented) Self**

Born in 1718, Watelet inherited from his father, Nicolas-Robert Watelet, the position of Receveur-général des Finances in Orléans, a post that enabled Watelet to command a certain

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<sup>1</sup>Denis Diderot, "Sur *L'Art de Peindre Poëme* par M. Watelet," (1760) *Œuvres complètes de Diderot: Beaux-arts, pt. 4: Miscellanea, Encyclopédie*, A-B (Paris: Garnier frères, 1876), 19. "Si le poëme m'appartenait, je couperais toutes les vignettes, je les mettrais sous des glaces, et je jetterais le reste au feu." All translations are my own unless noted otherwise.

level of social prestige and wealth.<sup>2</sup> With this financial freedom Watelet traveled widely in Europe, including a trip to Rome during which he encountered several young artists, including Jean-Baptiste Marie Pierre, who would later hold prominent positions in the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. He also began his art collection, which included paintings by Carle van Loo, Joseph Vernet, Hubert Robert, Charles-Joseph Natoire, pastels by Rosalba Carriera, and various enamels, miniatures, figures, vases, and scientific instruments. As an amateur artist himself, Watelet worked as a draughtsman and painter but primarily as an engraver, producing more than 150 prints over his career, including the vignettes in *L'Art de peindre*.

By the late 1750s Watelet had settled near Paris and his country home, le Moulin-Joli, had become a meeting-place for upper-class individuals interested in the arts and literature. Visitors included the Comte de Caylus, Jean-François Marmontel, the Abbé Jacques Delille, and the Marquise de Pompadour. Sylvia Lavin explains the importance of such connections for Watelet's particular social standing: "In the tradition of the *noblesse de merite*, Watelet was someone whose high social position was clearly facilitated by money, but justified on the basis of personal honor and reflected in what was considered to be the quality of his friends....[His] social status stood to benefit from a shift away from inherited privilege toward a notion of inherent and natural worth."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps in an effort to further publicize Watelet's "natural worth" in the arts, his mixed friend group of amateur artists and authors encouraged him to publish *L'Art de peindre* in 1760.

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<sup>2</sup>Henri Sée, *Economic and Social Conditions in France During the Eighteenth-Century*, trans. Edwin H. Zeydel (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2004), 104. Sée explains that compensation for this position stemmed from capitations from each generality's inhabitants.

<sup>3</sup>Sylvia Lavin, "Sacrifice and the Garden: Watelet's 'Essai sur les jardins' and the Space of the Picturesque," *Assemblage* 28 (1995): 19.



Even before the book's publication, however, Watelet was appointed to the rank of *associé-libre* at the Royal Academy and in 1766 obtained the title of *amateur honoraire*. Jean-Baptiste Colbert had established the rank of *amateur honoraire* in 1663, appointing to the post André Félibien, whose primary duty was to set down in precise terms the theoretical results of the *conférences*.<sup>4</sup> By the mid-eighteenth century the term *amateur* carried a range of connotations both in general and institutional usage. When it first appeared in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* in 1694, *amateur* encompassed two different meanings: someone who rendered artistic judgments and commissioned works from artists in a social context—similar to the role of a patron—and an individual who practiced the arts in an occasional manner, often under the instruction of professional artists.<sup>5</sup> Charlotte Guichard explains the institutional definition of the term: “The status of honorary *amateur* was extensively reorganized in 1747. This position, usually attributed to high members of the Administration des Bâtiments du Roi, was now open to larger Parisian elites, above all men well known for their taste and knowledge of the fine arts.”<sup>6</sup> She clarifies, moreover, that the role of the *amateur* was certainly not that of a public critic; rather, *amateurs* were expected to offer private, “friendly” advice to professional

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<sup>4</sup>Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 28. Crow notes later, however, that Félibien's first published volume of *conférences* stirred more interest among outside readers than the artists were prepared to deal with, and, as a result, the *amateur honoraire* was effectively prevented from publishing any more (33). The *conférences* were later reinstated in 1699 with J.H. Mansart's appointment of Roger de Piles as *amateur honoraire* and chief theoretician (36).

<sup>5</sup>Charlotte Guichard, “*Amateurs* and the Culture of Etching,” in *Artists and Amateurs: Etching in Eighteenth-Century France*, ed. Perrin Stein, ex. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 137.

<sup>6</sup>Charlotte Guichard, “Taste Communities: The Rise of the *Amateur* in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45.4 (Summer 2012): 523. She also notes the impact of the Comte de Caylus' 1748 lecture “De l'Amateur,” which provided a shifted theoretical rationale for the position.

artists.<sup>7</sup> While this role provided *amateurs* an entry point into artistic discourse, it strictly limited *how* they could participate within existing academic hierarchies.

Though Watelet garnered the respect of many contemporaries, his *amateur* title was inescapable both in his lifetime and in subsequent scholarship, as even the best amateurs remained hierarchically below professional artists. The early twentieth-century popular writer on art Lady Emilia Francis Strong Dilke characterizes Watelet not only as an *amateur* but as the *archetypal amateur* and quotes Charles Collé, an eighteenth-century French songwriter, to make her point:

Unfortunately one can only say, even of the best, that they show the good intentions of the intelligent amateur, and in that respect are about on a level with the literary efforts which, culminating in his versified and illustrated ‘Art de Peindre,’ opened to him the doors of the Academy. ‘M. Watelet,’ wrote Collé, ‘receiver-general of finance, is an amateur in the arts, but who, in not one of the arts showed genius or decided talent. He can paint, engrave, make poetry, but all at such a mediocre level that even the least of artists is infinitely above him.’<sup>8</sup>

Lady Dilke notes, however, that Watelet nevertheless gained a powerful level of access to major cultural institutions. In his particular *amateur* role with the Royal Academy, Watelet had previously recited sections of *L’Art de peindre* during the awarding of the Prix de Rome in 1751 and 1752; the subsequent publication of the poem then facilitated Watelet’s acceptance into the French Academy the following year on the basis of the work’s philosophical and poetic merits. In contrast to the tepid reactions of Diderot and Collé, Voltaire included a positive review of Watelet’s scholarship in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* from 1764 in which he advised all artists

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 524.

<sup>8</sup>Lady Emilia Francis Strong Dilke, *French Engravers and Draughtsmen of the XVIIIth Century* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1902), 13. Collé: ‘receveur général des finances, est un amateur des arts, mais qui, dans aucun n’a montré ni un génie ni un talent décidé. Il sait peindre, il sait graver, il a fait des vers, mais tout cela dans un degré si médiocre que le moindre des artistes est infiniment au-dessus de lui.’

to consult Watelet's "excellent lesson" on the human figure.<sup>9</sup> Watelet's fellow academician and noted scholar of natural history, the Comte de Buffon similarly lavished praise on Watelet's efforts, writing: "you have tried to do for Painting that which Horace did for Poetry, *a monument more durable than bronze.*"<sup>10</sup>

And Watelet's ideas were indeed durable. Many formed the basis for his later *Dictionnaire des arts de peinture, sculpture et gravure*, completed by Pierre Charles Lévesque and published in 1792, as well as his contributions to Diderot and Jean d'Alembert's monumental *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une Société de Gens de lettres*. Diderot's inclusion of Watelet's essays suggests that his pronounced distaste for *L'Art de peindre* stems from the book's form, not necessarily its content. Far from disagreeing with the work's didactic tenets, Diderot characterizes its content as fundamental (though basic) knowledge that even the newest artists should already know: "I find that, in this poem, there is nothing for artists or for people with taste...[and] for artists, the least of them already knows these things well."<sup>11</sup> He highlights only a single group—*les gens du monde*, translated loosely as "stylish people," who were frequently most interested in *appearing* vogue and erudite—who could benefit from "reading [Watelet's] notes well."<sup>12</sup> Diderot's low

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<sup>9</sup>Voltaire (François Marie Arouet), "Figure humaine," (1764) *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire: Dictionnaire philosophique*, vol.13 (Paris: Hachette, 1860), 383. "Figure humaine: par rapport à la peinture et à la sculpture; excellente leçon donnée par M. Watelet à tous les artistes."

<sup>10</sup>Buffon, Georges-Louis Leclerc (comte de), *Discours prononcés dans l'Académie française, le lundi XIX janvier M. DCC. LXI, à la réception de M. Watelet* (Paris, 1761), 18. "Vous avez essayé de faire pour la Peinture ce qu'Horace fit pour la Poësie, *un monument plus durable que le bronze.*"

<sup>11</sup>Diderot, "Sur *L'Art de Peindre*," 26. "Je trouve que, dans son poëme, il n'y rien pour les artistes ni pour les gens de goût...pour les artistes, le mince d'entre eux sait bien delà."

<sup>12</sup>Ibid. "...les gens du monde feront bien de lire ses notes."

judgment of *les gens du monde*, a social sphere with which Watelet and his friends were closely associated, further highlights how both individual and collective social identity could foster or restrict access to art making and theory. Thus, Diderot's claim that Watelet's book does not present any new information coupled with Watelet's institutional recognition situates *L'Art de peindre* as an ideal case study to investigate how Watelet represents himself through the material pieces of this book not merely as an *amateur* but also as a scholar with the right to participate in contemporary discourse on the arts.

### **The Semiotics of Genius**

In 1760, there were two versions of *L'Art de peindre* printed. The textual components vary only slightly between these editions, as most copies include an introductory letter to the members of the Royal Academy, opening comments on the project, a table of contents, an explanation of the illustrations' allegorical program, four poetic *chants* to Design, Color, Picturesque Invention, and Poetic Invention, brief *réflexions* on various artistic tenets such as Grace and Expression, and reproductions of various official documents and notices at the end of the book. Later versions with additional sections of text were printed in Amsterdam in 1761, and an Italian translation by Nemillo Caremicio was published in Geneva in 1765.

The artistic components of the two publications differ more substantially. The publisher of what is considered the initial printing in later bibliographies is unknown, but this quarto edition, with the complete title, *L'Art de Peindre, poëme par M. Watelet, associé-libre de l'Académie royale de Peinture et Sculpture*, contained six vignettes and the same number of

*culs-de-lampe*.<sup>13</sup> A second octavo printing by Parisian publishers H.L. Guérin and L.F. Delatour was more widely circulated. With the longer title, *L'Art de Peindre, poëme avec des Réflexions sur les différentes parties de la peinture par M. Watelet, associé-libre de l'Académie royale de Peinture et Sculpture*, books from this printing contain approximately 150 pages and measure 16x10.5 centimeters, although some extant copies are as large as 30x23 centimeters. Each contains the following illustrative components: a frontispiece depicting recognizably allegorical figures; a fleuron, often a lyre or *coq Gaulois*, on the adjacent title page; five or six vignettes, similar in style and subject to the frontispiece, positioned as headpieces of pages designating new *chants*; six *culs-de-lampe*, frequently floral but sometimes figural, placed immediately below the concluding paragraph of each section; eight medallion portraits of earlier great artists, such as Raphael and Michelangelo, positioned at the beginning of new *Réflexions*; and two outline plates, “Antinoüs” and “Venus de Medici,” accompanying Watelet’s instructions for proportioning figures.<sup>14</sup> Due to the second printing’s increased production and circulation, all of the images and texts I analyze are from these editions.

Watelet engraved the majority of the illustrations in *L'Art de peindre*, the largest of which were the frontispieces, the first image a reader would encounter when opening the book.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Henry Cohen, *Guide de l'amateur de livres à gravures du XVIIIe siècle*, vol.1 (Paris : P. Rouquette, 1886), 620.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.* In *Prints for Books: Book Illustration in France 1760-1800* (London: The British Library, 2004), Antony Griffiths notes that by the 1760s the illustrative elements in “any ambitious literary book published in France” had become predictable through the inclusion of four types of designs: the full-page *estampe*, vignette headers, *cul-de-lampe* tailpieces, and a fleuron in the title (1).

<sup>15</sup>Though beyond the scope of this project, certain copies of *L'Art de peindre* also contained engravings by another amateur artist, Marguerite Le Comte—Watelet’s own student and lover. Herself a pastelist and etcher, she contributed tailpieces as well as *culs-de-lampe* to the octavo editions.

The frontispieces of two versions of the second 1760 printing (figure 1-2) each situate three figures around an unfurled scroll emblazoned with the title of book, *L'Art de peindre*. Emphasizing the etymological as well as functional similarities between a literary frontispiece and an architectural façade, Mary Sheriff notes that the frontispiece, in theory, should prepare readers for the textual content of the work.<sup>16</sup> By including a representation of *L'Art de peindre*, these frontispieces not only gesture to the edificatory function of the following text but also highlight the importance of the book as a material object to be admired, read, and circulated. The figures in the first frontispiece are noticeably younger than those in the second group, who appear to be at least adolescents if not adults; both groups, however, seem to represent the same allegorical types. The winged male figure at the left is Genius, signified by the flame sprouting from his head—a prominent feature in many eighteenth-century illustrations of *Génie*, as exemplified in the 1791 book of allegorical figures, *Iconologie Par Figures* (figure 3). Through the dramatic act of unfurling the scroll, the allegorical Genius claims ownership over (or, at very minimum, his role in the creation of) *L'Art de peindre*, which positions him as a kind of author. This comingling of authorship in the frontispiece between the allegory and Watelet, who is named as author on the adjacent title page, establishes a suggestive proximity of the work's *amateur* author to the idea of genius—a tension crucial to both my own project and the book's contemporary reception.

The rightmost figures are allegories or Muses of Painting and Poetry, signified respectively by the palette and horn. Watelet confirms these identifications, as well as others, in the second printing's explanatory text, which (somewhat forcefully) strives to establish the book's overall iconography:

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<sup>16</sup>Mary Sheriff, "Decorating Knowledge: The Ornamental Book, the Philosophic Image, and the Naked Truth," *Art History* 28.2 (2005): 159.

The frontispiece represents Genius rendering homage to the Muses of Poetry and Painting, by presenting them with a scroll on which is the title of the work. The Muses are characterized by the attributes that suit them; they are decorated with a garland of flowers. This garland unites them to one another, to designate the uniformity of their principles that must continually bring them together and that the same ornaments suit them. The rays that form the background of the composition also indicate that the Muses must, in following the traces [*les traces*] of Genius, rise with him into a clear and cloudless sky.<sup>17</sup>

But though Watelet names the figure as Poetry explicitly, the inclusion of the laurel wreath as well as the horn also suggests eighteenth-century allegorical representations of Fame or *Gloire*, an example of which is also represented in *Iconologie Par Figures* (figure 4). This possible conflation of Poetry and Fame may emphasize the role of poetry *as a way to fame*, which parallels the historical importance of *L'Art de peindre* in facilitating Watelet's accumulation of institutional recognition and power. Moreover, the beams of light that seems to explode from the top-center of both frontispieces acts as metaphors (or, perhaps more aptly, signs) for the concept of *lumière* and philosophical enlightenment more broadly and underscore the book's ambitions to participate in existing Enlightenment discourse.

Although the edition containing the first frontispiece does not include an explication of the allegorical program as in the second, the choice to illustrate babies and particularly as they perform adult tasks was not uncommon in the period. Angela Rosenthal points out that the subject of "infant academies," or groups of children ranging from infants to around seven years old engaging in artistic pursuits, was a theme popular across various media and handled by some of the most respected artists of the period, including William Hogarth, Joshua Reynolds, Carle

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<sup>17</sup>Watelet, *L'Art de peindre*, 1760, BnF, xvii. "Le frontispice représente le Génie qui rend hommage aux Muses de la Poésie & de la Peinture, en leur présentant un rouleau sur lequel est le titre de l'Ouvrage. Les Muses sont caractérisées par les attributs qui leur conviennent ; elles sont ornées d'une guirlande de fleurs. Cette guirlande les unit l'une à l'autre, pour désigner que l'uniformité de leurs principes doit les rapprocher incessamment, & que les mêmes ornements leur conviennent. Les rayons qui forment le fond de la composition font connaître aussi, que les Muses doivent, en suivant les traces du Génie, s'élever avec lui dans un ciel pur & sans nuages."

van Loo, Jean-Baptiste Greuze, and, perhaps most famously, François Boucher.<sup>18</sup> Children of this age appear throughout the vignettes of this edition (figures 4-8) as they melancholically contemplate canvases, look over folios (some much larger than they are), and extend a brush to touch a sculpted bust. The other headpieces in second edition show mature figures, as well as younger children, ostensibly enacting Watelet's call to follow Genius into the sky through the pursuit of artistic studies (figures 9-12). In both editions, the non-figural designs primarily consist of ornamental *culs-de-lampe* marking section breaks (example, figure 14), though a small number of these also contain figures in scenes echoing the larger frontispieces and vignettes (figure 16). Though the illustrations' subject matter engages frequently with themes of artistic creation and education beyond the frontispieces, in this project I abstain from tackling their discursive aspects (features that shows the influence of language over the image) at length to focus on their figural aspects, which Norman Bryson defines as "those features which belong to an image as a visual experience independent of language—its 'being-as-image.'"<sup>19</sup>

Watelet's signature appears in the lower right corner of most engravings. His name, however, is ubiquitously accompanied by another: Pierre. A fellow Frenchman whom Watelet first met in Rome, Jean-Marie Baptiste Pierre by 1760 was a professor in the Royal Academy and would go on to assume the discipline's highest post—First Painter to the King—within a decade.<sup>20</sup> Pierre collaborated with Watelet by creating designs specifically for *L'Art de peindre*

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<sup>18</sup>Angela Rosenthal, "Infant Academies and the Childhood of Art: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's 'Julie with a Mirror,' *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 37.4 (2004): 612. She also notes that Boucher first popularized images of children performing adult tasks generally.

<sup>19</sup>Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting in the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 6.

<sup>20</sup>Michael Levey, *Painting and Sculpture in France, 1700-1789* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 184.



after which Watelet then produced his engravings.<sup>21</sup> Though such double signatures were not uncommon, their presence accentuates the double-authorship of the illustrations in the final, printed versions of the book. They highlight that both Pierre, a professional artist, and Watelet, an *amateur*, touched these works. How do these engravings, then, fit within eighteenth-century ideas that valued the artist's touch as a trace of individual genius as well as the concept of the "original" work of art? And how do they fit within Watelet's agenda of self-representation?

Eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse privileged the visibility of the painter's touch as a trace of the creative state of mind. Sheriff explains: "Because enthusiasm was the fire that motivated the artist to create, that emotion left its traces in the action, the play, the physical touch of the brush."<sup>22</sup> Watelet himself characterizes the artist's touch as an imitative sign tied to the object represented and, simultaneously, as an expressive sign linked to how the artist saw and felt in making the representation.<sup>23</sup> First, as an imitative sign, the touch must adequately represent or be appropriate for the object represented. In practice and theory, this idea was encapsulated by term *convenance*, a notion that sought to guarantee the "truth" of nature was represented in all aspects of a work.<sup>24</sup>

As an expressive sign, touch (in Watelet's conception) functions as an indexical sign of the artist's mental state. Charles Sanders Peirce's explanation of indexicality is helpful here. He explains that in an indexical sign, the object is necessarily existent and connected to its index as a

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<sup>21</sup>Guichard, "Amateurs and the Culture of Etching," 141.

<sup>22</sup>Mary Sheriff, *Moved by Love: Inspired Artists and Deviant Women in Eighteenth-Century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 136.

<sup>23</sup>Claude-Henri Watelet and Pierre Charles Levesque, "Touche," *Dictionnaire des arts de peinture, sculpture et gravure*, 5 vols. (Paris: Chez Prault, 1792), 5:786.

<sup>24</sup>Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 39.

matter of fact, often through a direct physical connection.<sup>25</sup> Whereas the artist painting directly onto the canvas constitutes an index, in printmaking, the direct object of the indexical print is the engraved plate; Peirce's description of the index as a fragment torn away from the object makes this relationship quite clear. Watelet's conception of indexicality, however, extends Peirce's definition to include not just the presence of the artist but also his subjective feeling. As James Phillips points out, indices of this nature anchor the speaker—or in this case, the maker—in the world as deictic indicators of “this particular here and now and the world of this particular intersubjective situation,” with the artist's emotions captured in the indexical trace.<sup>26</sup> And in addition to the creation of indices by individuals, Peirce argues that man himself is an index, which he calls the semiotic self, and can only be known indirectly through the relation of external signs.<sup>27</sup>

Condillac also articulated similar semiotic distinctions in his 1746 publication, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*. He posits the difference between natural signs—those produced instinctively upon having particular experiences—and artificial or instituted signs—those employed as representations for experiences. The artist's touch conceived as a natural sign, “or cries which nature has established to express the passions of joy, of fear, or of grief,”

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<sup>25</sup>Peirce, Charles Sanders, “Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs” (1897), in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 102.

<sup>26</sup>James Phillips, “Peircean Reflections on Psychotic Discourse,” in *Peirce, Semiotics, and Psychoanalysis*, eds. John Muller and Joseph Brent (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 31.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

underscores the touch as a creative act, unmediated by an artist's cognizance of what the produced sign will signify, which seemingly sidesteps reason.<sup>28</sup>

But such simultaneity is perplexing: how can the rational cognizance necessary to craft imitative/artificial signs exist alongside the direct transcription of emotion into touch in an indexical/natural sign, an act that presupposes a lack of conscious decision-making? Sheriff tackles this issue by highlighting the mid-eighteenth century in France as a period of incredible flux in both art theory and criticism. She describes the concurrent existence of the previously dominant "aristocratic model" associated with imitative or artificial signs and the emerging "genius model" associated with expressive or natural signs. Whereas the first "accepted artifice and the audience agreed to be deluded by it," the newer discourse of spontaneous expression posited differently: "the artist was an enthused genius and his art was a genuine index of his emotional state; artifice was degraded and the viewer saw what was signified directly."<sup>29</sup>

This conception of the touch as a trace of the artist's creative mental state was later extended into a larger endeavor to root out an artist's "true" character and subjecthood by analyzing his collective oeuvre. As Melissa Hyde points out, the "usual eighteenth-century impulse to conceive of the 'work as the life,' a conception in which the 'artist'—not unlike Michel Foucault's 'author'—is not a person but a set of pictorial texts" transforms in the late eighteenth century into the proto-Romantic "determination to find the [historical] man by

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<sup>28</sup>Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *An essay on the origin of human knowledge. Being a supplement to Mr. Locke's essay on the human understanding*, trans. Thomas Nugent (London: 1756), I.ii.4.51.

<sup>29</sup>Sheriff, *Fragonard*, 147.

looking at the work.”<sup>30</sup> Even if the ultimate aim was to extract signifying information about the artist’s emotive state from the visible touch in this emerging methodology, however, it also prompted viewers to pay greater attention to the physicality of the paint on the canvas, as the materiality of the medium became the privileged way by which a viewer could access an artist’s genius.

### **Artistic Authorship and “Original” Engravings**

Watelet’s characterization of the artist’s touch as both imitative and expressive finds a direct parallel in contemporaneous debates on the role of prints. Throughout the century the practice of collecting prints increased in popularity, technical advances abounded, and the first poem dedicated to the medium, Louis Doissin’s *La Gravure* from 1753, appeared in publication. Yet although printmaking was an acknowledged fine art within the Royal Academy, George Levitine points out that printmaking in France in particular was not regarded as a truly major art form and certainly not considered the equal of painting.<sup>31</sup> He highlights the institutional bias against printmakers even within the Royal Academy:

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<sup>30</sup>Melissa Hyde, “Getting into the Picture: Boucher’s Self-Portraits of Others,” in *Rethinking Boucher*, eds. Melissa Hyde and Mark Ledbury (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006), 14.

<sup>31</sup>George Levitine, “French Eighteenth-Century Printmaking in Search of Cultural Assertion,” in *Regency to Empire: French Printmaking, 1715-1814*, eds. Victor I. Carlson, John W. Ittmann, David Becker (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art and Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 1984), 15. He points to the greater importance of print traditions outside France: “Writing in 1771, Karl Heinrich von Heineken, the curator of the Dresden collections, recalled that ‘printmaking did not always subject itself to an exclusive production of copies; it has shown that it could successfully aspire to the glory of invention; it is actually in this capacity that it won most honor for itself.’ He then mentioned Albrecht Durer, Hendrick Goltzius, Rembrandt, Parmigianino, Stefano della Bella, Jacques Callot, and Sébastien Le Clerc, in particular, as artists who ‘have engraved many prints with subjects, entirely composed by themselves, that are not executed after paintings.’ ”

In 1704, it was decided that in order to be accepted into this august body a printmaker had to submit, as his reception pieces, portrait reproductions of two members of the academy, which were assigned to him: likenesses of painters, sculptors, or architects—but never those of printmakers. One wonders how many eighteenth-century printmakers shared the bitter regrets of the famous seventeenth-century etcher Stefano della Bella at not having chosen the painter's profession.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, printmaking was valued almost singularly for its imitative capacity, and “good” printmakers acted creatively only in the quest for reproductive fidelity to the original's medium.

Diderot articulates this expectation in his *Salon* of 1765: “Acting as a painter's translator, the printmaker must show the talent and the style of the original model. One does not engrave after *Raphael* as after *Guercino*, after *Guercino* as after *Domenichino*... When the engraver has shown intelligence, the painter's manner is felt at first glance at the print.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, a printmaker can produce a good print, not only in faithfully translating a painting, but also in stylistically enslaving himself to the painter he is copying, to the point of forgetting his own.<sup>34</sup> Even as he applauds the technical prowess of reproductive printmakers, Diderot strips away their agency as *artistic* inventors, effectively barring them from the highest imaginative realms of enthusiasm and genius. This distinction becomes even more pronounced, as Katie Scott demonstrates, because the engravings made by printmakers after a painter's works were reproduced as catalogs, which, when circulated, intensified “the aura of the artist by unifying artistic identity in the

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 17. See also Sarah Hyde's analysis of the more pronounced hierarchy in the English Royal Academy, where engravers were not allowed to become full academicians, in *Drawings in Print: The reproduction of drawings in eighteenth-century England* (London: Courtauld Institute Galleries, 1983).

<sup>33</sup>Diderot, *Diderot Salons*, 1765, 2:225-26. Quoted and translated in Levitine, “French Eighteenth-Century Printmaking,” 15.

<sup>34</sup>Levitine, “French Eighteenth-Century Printmaking,” 15.

engraved corpus,” with little to no recognition of the printmaker’s artistic agency.<sup>35</sup> Peter Wagner elaborates on this elevation of the artist through print reproductions by highlighting the falsity of the engraved painter’s signature. He argues its inclusion claims “presence in absence while effacing the difference between originality and reproduction, reality and representation.”<sup>36</sup> I return to this issue of the signature as an assertion of an artist-author’s presence, even in absence, in this project’s epilogue.

Although the concept of an “original print” is absent from French art theory in the period, including Watelet’s *Dictionnaire*, exceptional printmakers who were recognized for their own expressive touch did exist in the eighteenth century. Levitine highlights Jean-François Cars, who, it was reported with praise, far from wanting to act as a simple craftsman or mere copyist, aimed at giving his own interpretation to François Lemoyne’s paintings.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, it was not uncommon for Royal Academy printmakers to hold highly influential administrative offices. Charles-Nicolas Cochin *fils*, for example, was not only himself a draughtsman and printmaker but came from one of the most powerful artistic dynasties in France. A prolific writer on the arts, by 1755 Cochin was appointed official historiographer of the Royal Academy and was granted an official patent of nobility from Louis XV in March 1757. Biographers note that neither

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<sup>35</sup>Katie Scott, “Reproduction and Reputation: ‘François Boucher’ and the Formation of Artistic Identities,” in *Rethinking Boucher*, eds. Melissa Hyde and Mark Ledbury (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006), 91.

<sup>36</sup>Peter Wagner, *Reading Iconotexts: From Swift to the French Revolution* (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), 91.

<sup>37</sup>Levitine, “French Eighteenth-Century Printmaking,” 15.

Diderot nor the Marquis de Marigny would finalize their respective critical or administrative decisions without first consulting “the oracle” Cochin.<sup>38</sup>

Cochin’s articulation of his own medium’s relationship to other arts raises the possibility for authorial manipulation in printmaking. Using the same literary analogy as Diderot, he wrote in the comments added to his 1758 edition of Abraham Bosse’s *Traité de la gravure* that printmakers learn how “to transmit the beauty of a very rich language into another, which is actually less rich and presents difficulties, but which offers equivalents inspired by genius and taste.”<sup>39</sup> With the term “equivalents,” Cochin highlights the printmaker’s prerogative not only to “translate” the subjects and forms in the black-and-white, two-dimensional medium but also somehow to present the physicality of the original, its texture, reflections, transparencies, and—the most traditionally challenging—color.<sup>40</sup> And as technical processes advanced in the eighteenth century, however, so did the printmaker’s range of options, which included modulating the width and depth of cuttings and crosshatchings, ordering the direction and intersection of lines, changing the types and patterns of dots, controlling the gradations and contrasts of lights and darks, and supplementing the techniques of engraving with those of etching, among others.<sup>41</sup> These technologies enabled printmakers to approximate other media, especially drawing, much more deftly, to the point that some media differences were unrecognizable on sight.

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<sup>38</sup>Rémy G. Saisselin, “Ut Pictura Poesis: DuBos to Diderot,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20.2 (1961): 146.

<sup>39</sup>Levitine, “French Eighteenth-Century Printmaking,” 14.

<sup>40</sup>For a comprehensive study of new printmaking technologies developed in the period, see *Colorful Impressions: The Printmaking Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France*, ed. Margaret Morgan Grasselli (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2003).

<sup>41</sup>Levitine, “French Eighteenth-Century Printmaking,” 14.

This potential interchange of media brings us back to the notion of touch—if an artist’s touch was perfectly reproducible, how could it be a trace of individual genius or emotion? This query solicits questions of the original and the copy. Christopher Wood explains this debate’s relevance for printmaking: “The reliability of mechanical copying paradoxically allowed the conception of a unique, non-interchangeable style to take hold. . . . The authored, event-like artwork could now define itself clearly against the background of the print. The concept of the original comes into focus only through the lens of its opposite, the perfect replica.”<sup>42</sup> Carl Goldstein expounds upon this phenomenon: “The paradox, then, is twofold: first, that multiple production resulted in a new appreciation of the unique work of art; and second, that it called attention to the hand of the artist.”<sup>43</sup>

Thus in the case of the engravings in *L’Art de peindre*, what constitutes the “original”—Pierre’s drawings or Watelet’s engravings—and how does this distinction inflect our understand of touch? Neither represents a unique original and this ambiguity contributes to Watelet’s self-representation as an artist not only by demonstrating his own technical-artistic abilities but also by inscribing these traces within the work of another superior artist, which also affirms his rising

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<sup>42</sup>Christopher Wood, *Forgery, Replica, and Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 126-17. See also Elizabeth L. Eisenstein’s seminal work on social and intellectual changes made possible through mechanical reproduction, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>43</sup>Goldstein, *Print Culture in Early Modern France*, 30. He continues: “A definite sequence is now established privileging the first or original work in a series, with traditional notions of the singular preeminence of the author reaffirmed and indeed bolstered. . . . Walter Benjamin, most famously, later examines the same phenomenon in relation to photography and film—media in which the ‘original’ is also not unique—and argues mechanical reproduction leads to the loss of a work’s aura, its unique existence in time and space” (“The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction”).



social star.<sup>44</sup> Whereas printing reproductions of paintings sets up a clearer relationship between original and copy, the material process of translating a drawing to an engraving as well as the particularities of this project blur that distinction. Goldstein outlines the requisite destruction of the final drawing in the printmaking process: “a drawing is transferred by coating the reverse of the paper with carbonate of lead and then tracing the image onto a lightly waxed plate by pressing along the contours of the figures. This process, once completed, would have left a discolored and torn sheet hardly worth preserving.”<sup>45</sup> Extant drawings for prints are, for the most part, not the final designs but those leading up to them.

Because Pierre’s drawings were made exclusively to be engraved by Watelet for this specific project and never meant to be “finished” works of art in their own right, only Watelet’s engravings are finished works and are also, to my current knowledge, the only extant traces of either artist’s “touch.” These circumstances force Watelet’s engravings to be evaluated independently rather than judged as translations of something else, which brings his artistic touch to the forefront and allows his abilities as an engraver to figure singularly in critiques of the designs. Watelet thus entrenches himself in the role of the graphic artist, a necessary entry point, as exemplified by Cochin’s biography, into an institutional space in which he can then contribute to artistic discourse.

This process also constituted a performance of Watelet’s own knowledge through an engagement with material creation. Guichard explains: “Copying a work by engraving was proof

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<sup>44</sup>For a persuasive discussion of the central role of copying, or “borrowing,” in academic instruction on creating “original” work of art going back to the Renaissance, see Carl Goldstein’s *Teaching Art: Academies and Schools from Vasari to Albers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 115-136. He brings in Roland Barthes’ parallel literary argument that the notion of the “original” is in fact the perverse idea, as all texts of literature are “copies” in an infinite regress and any single text is only an entry point into all literary texts (117).

<sup>45</sup>Goldstein, *Print Culture in Early Modern France*, 32.

of one's knowledge, and went far beyond the aesthetic pleasure involved in the reproduction. It also involved manipulating the object; it was a tactile, not merely visual, form of appropriation. In the culture of *amateurs*, knowledge was a praxis, not a theory."<sup>46</sup> Yet the double-authorship of Pierre and Watelet in the creation of these engravings also situates Watelet in a particular professional role by virtue of his collaboration with the powerful artist in creating an "original." In making this argument, I follow Ewa Lajer-Burcharth's conceptualization of touch as a means by which a lesser artist can diminish difference "*through someone else's touch*" as a means of self-individualism.<sup>47</sup>

Lajer-Burcharth reexamines the relationship between an artist and a sitter—in her study, François Boucher and Madame de Pompadour—as they encounter each other in material representation, the trace of which is the so-called Munich Portrait (figure 13). Madame de Pompadour was also an amateur printmaker with Boucher as her teacher, which parallels the relationship between Pierre and Watelet. Boucher includes Pompadour's etching tools in the lower left and a print bearing the signatures of both parties, exactly like those by Pierre and Watelet. This small detail complicates the conventional roles of artist and sitter as Boucher then becomes the replicator of Pompadour's prints and her signature. Such an inclusion (and the instability between subject-object that it provokes) exemplifies Lajer-Burcharth's understanding of touch as a "diacritical mark, a supplement performing within, and thus reconfiguring the

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<sup>46</sup>Guichard, "The Rise of the Amateur in Eighteenth-Century Paris," 539.

<sup>47</sup>Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "Pompadour's Touch: Difference in Representation," *Representations* 73.1 (Winter 2001): 59.

material field of representation.”<sup>48</sup> She articulates why eighteenth-century art objects, especially portraits, call out for a methodology based on tactility:

Such a shift of emphasis from the visual to the material is especially warranted by the emergence of the philosophical materialism that, in the period under discussion, provided a radically new account of the self *as* matter and thus also, I would argue, cast the material status of art as a form of self-representation in a new light....It was precisely within the philosophical matrix of materialism that touch was established as a key category for understanding the formation of subjectivity. Thus, in the new sensualist psychology, both intellectual capacities and the sense of self were linked to experience conveyed through the senses, with particular emphasis on touch.<sup>49</sup>

Operating under this materialist understanding of the self as matter, in the process of engraving, Watelet quite literally writes himself, through the touch of his burin, on top of Pierre’s designs to form a “new” “original.” His complete reconfiguration of the medium is arguably a more radical alteration of the material field than Pompadour’s supplements within the portrait. Watelet’s haptic interventions in Pierre’s designs foreground his agency as an artist with both mechanical and mental ability. But does Watelet disperse such interventions, these “diacritical marks,” in media other than his own engravings?

### **Materialism and Fantasies: Watelet in Paint**

Jean-Baptiste Greuze’s *Portrait of Claude-Henri Watelet* (figure 14) is my second case study of Watelet’s program of self-representation related to *L’Art de peindre*. Painted between 1763 and 1765, when it was exhibited at the Salon, Greuze’s image shows the *amateur* seated at

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<sup>48</sup>Lajer-Burcharth explains this complication of the subject-object dichotomy: “The tactile realm harks back to the earliest stages of psychic development when the subject/object (infant/mother) distinction is not yet firmly established. The recognition of two-ness provided by touch is thus far more fluid than the one established visually, and it does not imply the hierarchy inherent in the scopic distinction between the active (looking) subject and the passive (looked-at) object...difference announces itself not in terms of perceptual distance and disparity but through the haptic experience of closeness and contiguity” (58).

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 56.

his desk in a space that is presumably his study, as indicated by the compass in his right hand and the open book, inkwell, and *écritoire* on the writing desk. A bronze miniature of the Medici Venus in the classical pudica, or “modest Venus,” pose is situated across from Watelet, and as a pair, the two bodies function as foils. Whereas the figure of Venus is female, nude, bronze, and a recognizable work of art (and thus inanimate), Watelet is male, heavily clothed, and his soft flesh is “alive” in the sense that this visage signifies a living man. The positioning of their bodies inversely mirrors the other not only because they face one another but also due to their arm positions: Watelet raises his right while resting his left and Venus curves her right arm in front of her breasts while her left extends downward to cover her groin.

This counterbalancing coupled with their inverse bodily positions suggests that only together do the figures form a single whole. I propose this painting functions not only as a portrait of Watelet the man but also as a (seemingly unmediated) representation of his creative process, the generation of both art and knowledge. Thus the pairing of Watelet and the Medici Venus underscores the primary aspects of this process in relation to art: a creator (Watelet), his inspiration (Venus), and his creation (*L'Art de peindre*, signified by the open book). Moreover, the formal and narrative components of this triangulation, pictured as inherently complete, in fact obscure the intervention, the touch, of the actual painter, Greuze, who does not include even a signature to interrupt this fantastical depiction of Watelet as author, artist, and scholar.

In his unfavorable critique of the portrait during the Salon of 1765, Diderot collapses the distinction between Watelet's painted representation and the living sitter. His comments on the painting are curt and focus singularly on Watelet: “It is dull; there is something cloudy and

overcast about it. And that is just the man himself: turn the painting over.”<sup>50</sup> Though slighting Watelet in the process, Diderot in fact praises Greuze’s adherence to “truth” not just in creating a physical *likeness* of Watelet but of materializing characteristics of the sitter’s personality—typically unseeable aspects—in paint. Barbara Stafford argues that this exact transformation occupied a critical point in the period’s artistic and philosophical discourse: “The desire to visibilize the invisible, at the core of eighteenth-century discussions on the presentation of ideas, entailed a corporealization of the soul.”<sup>51</sup> This context then begs the question: what in this painting conveys Watelet the man?

A return to Lajer-Burcharth’s argument about Madame de Pompadour’s representation in the Munich portrait (figure 13) is helpful here. Like Greuze’s portrait of Watelet, Boucher’s image depicts the sitter in contemporary dress surrounded by her accoutrements. Lajer-Burcharth proposes the inclusion of the sitter’s things intimately linked to how she wanted to appear—“things in which her self may be seen to *extend*, as it were”—constitutes the unfolding of the self from the body and onto material objects in which the sitter’s touch may be located.<sup>52</sup> She concludes: “Thus in the Munich Boucher, Mme de Pompadour *is* precisely in its details, and in the difference that their palpable rendition produces within the field of representation. . . . Such a mode of rendering through enfolding and mutual entanglement of objects and the body may be recognized as a specifically materialist vision of the self.”<sup>53</sup> This re-articulation (and distribution)

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<sup>50</sup>Diderot, *Œuvres*, ed. Laurent Versini, 5 vols. (Paris : Robert Laffont, 1996), 4:386. Quoted and translated in Guichard, “The Rise of the *Amateur* in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” 519.

<sup>51</sup>Barbara Stafford, “From ‘Brilliant Ideas’ to ‘Fitful Thoughts’: Conjuring the Unseen in Late Eighteenth-Century Art,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 48.3 (1985): 341.

<sup>52</sup>Lajer-Burcharth, “Pompadour’s Touch: Difference in Representation,” 68.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*

of the body from within conventions of royal portraiture constitutes Pompadour's touch, she argues, itself "an extension and duplication from within the pictorial trace."<sup>54</sup>

This expansion of the sitter outward from a corporeal form to include physical objects is certainly at play in Watelet's portrait. Greuze accomplishes this in part by amplifying the tactility of the materials in the portrait through illusionistic renderings: the silken creases of Watelet's garment contrast with the solid wood of the table, and the interplay of both render the contours of his discrete body unclear. This particular style of robe and matching pants was termed dressing "en négligé," and frequently associated with artists, writers, and scholars, who, like Watelet, were often depicted in studio or study spaces. Similarly, the *bureau plat* contains gilt bronze finishes that highlight both the piece's cost and craftsmanship. This juxtaposition of materials creates a haptic symphony of sorts and invites the viewer to consider what the materials would feel like when touched. It also confounds the boundary between the senses of sight and touch in a moment of synesthesia that in some ways parallels the printmaker's ability to blur distinctions between originals and copies.

Guichard interprets the multiplicity of signifiers in this portrait as emblematic of the various facets of an *amateur's* position: "as a member of the Académie royale, Watelet published scholarly works on painting, went to Rome, was known as an amateur engraver, and commissioned works of art from contemporary artists."<sup>55</sup> In their readings of the portrait, both Guichard and Diderot engage with Watelet's representation through the framework of the semiotic self—the theory later articulated explicitly by Peirce that the self is represented

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 70.

<sup>55</sup>Guichard, "The Rise of the *Amateur* in Eighteenth-Century Paris," 522.

indirectly through external signs. Such a materialist vision of the self intersects directly with Jean Perkins' characterization of philosophical shifts in the period:

The concept of the self had passed from that of a static substance, through that of a fluid, non-organized entity, to that of an active formative structure... At the same time, the balance of certainty of existential being, represented by "Je pense," through empirical sensationalism, represented by "Je sens," to come to rest, temporarily at least, in the rather peculiar certainty of existential being, represented by "Je suis"... by the latter part of the century when either Rousseau or Diderot announce, "Je sens, donc je suis," one can just as easily understand "Je suis, donc je sens."<sup>56</sup>

Thus, the self could be represented as an active accumulation of parts or signs, which could each also indicate meanings beyond a specific self, underscoring the inherently social framework of individual signification in the period. This network of signs intersects with Sheriff's proposition that painting, as an act of citation (and interpretation), depends on a sharing of cultural materials, which presents the opportunity to challenge normative paradigms through the production of "the unreliable facsimile."<sup>57</sup> This theory allows for the portrait's individual signifiers of Watelet the man—the *négligé*, the gesture, the compass—to not only reference established "meanings" and associations but also found new ones through their particular rendering and combination in this image, which in turn nuances the larger semiotic lexicon.

In addition to these piecemeal signifiers of Watelet the man, the positions of Watelet and the bronze Venus suggest an unfolding narrative of touch within the pictorial space. In the moment depicted, Watelet already touches his open book in a gesture of authorial ownership reinforced by the visible quill and inkwell on the desk. Although Watelet points the compass toward his own chest, one can imagine that Greuze presents us with the moment immediately

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<sup>56</sup>Jean A. Perkins, *The Concept of the Self in the French Enlightenment* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1969), 40.

<sup>57</sup>Mary Sheriff, "Letters: Painted, Penned, Purloined," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 26 (1997): 38.

before Watelet reaches out to measure Venus. Moreover, the compass signifies “measured” reason and its phallic nature then can be seen as an extension of man’s capacity to touch and gain knowledge about the world. The detail of the satyr’s head on the leg of the desk, situated prominently between Watelet’s spread legs, underscores the eroticism of the encounter. The idea of an artist, even an *amateur*, touching a sculpture in a sexual manner calls up the ancient story of Pygmalion, the artist who falls in love with his creation, Galatea, who then comes alive with the intervention of the gods.<sup>58</sup> But unlike Pygmalion, Watelet did not create the Medici Venus, the sculpted figure of the perfect woman, and her pudica gesture underscores a resistance to his impending touch. The created object paralleling Galatea in Greuze’s painted narrative is *L’Art de peindre*, depicted in this image as a literal work in progress below Watelet’s left hand.

This identification is confirmed yet complicated by the faint sketch of a female form already drawn on the right page of the open book, which corresponds to the instructive illustration of Venus de Medici in *L’Art de peindre* (figure 17). This confirmation of the depicted scene’s correlation to *L’Art de peindre* exposes the fictiveness of this painted narrative as a “real” historical moment recorded by Greuze because the final engraving includes the typical double-signatures of Pierre and Watelet. Watelet may well have provided the measurements and perhaps even a sketch as a basis for Pierre’s composition; however, the *amateur* did not complete the entire creative process, from inspiration to final engraving, independently. And he is certainly not responsible for the translation of the Venus de Medici design into its current painted form. Nevertheless, Greuze presents viewers with a scene that revels in the fantasy of touch as a trace

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<sup>58</sup>Eighteenth-century viewers may have had a heightened awareness of this story because Jean-Jacques Rousseau composed a short play *Pygmalion* 1762 based on the classical story. However, this play was not staged until 1770, and it is unclear to what extent his manuscript circulated.



of individual genius by positioning Watelet in the imagined moment between inspiration and a material recording of this emotion on the pages below.

Greuze's portrait further underscores the fantasy of Watelet as single author through the absence of the painter's own signature. This lack initially struck me as a curious one: why would Watelet (if he in fact influenced this decision) not want to advertise that such influential painter—indeed, “the dominant personality in the Salons of the 1760s”<sup>59</sup>—authored his portrait? A signature would further highlight both Watelet's social connections to professional artists, augmenting his demonstrated relationship with Pierre, and his wealth by implication of the commissioning price. But, as Sheriff notes, signatures often remain an alien presence in a painting and disrupt their illusion. Even when integrated in a *trompe l'oeil* manner, the signature signifies as both writing and painting, the latter directly associated with the uniqueness of this artist's hand.<sup>60</sup> By omitting his own signature, then, Greuze reinforces the illusionistic veracity of the picture plane and invites viewer to think not about his artistic touch but Watelet's instead, an interpretation strengthened by Diderot's critical silence on Greuze's hand.

Thus, Greuze employs both composition, in the placement of Watelet's hand on the text, and suggested narrative, that he is in the moment of active, perhaps even enthused, contemplation, to associate the esteemed “hand of the artist” with *L'Art de peindre* specifically, as a material representation of Watelet. I argue this association applies to Greuze's painted representation of the book as well as physical copies of the book existing in the world, which allows me to now consider the final component piece functioning as a representation of Watelet, the text itself.

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<sup>59</sup>Crow, *Painters and Public Life*, 134.

<sup>60</sup>Sheriff, “Letters: Painted, Penned, Purloined,” 37.

## Poetic Form, Discursive Interventions

The opening lines of Watelet's *chant* to Design provide both a textual counterpart for the above-proposed narrative in Greuze's portrait and an extension of the iconography in the book's frontispiece: "I sing the Art of Painting: O Venus-Urania,/ Assist my works, inspire my genius,/ Allow me to enter the Temple of the Arts."<sup>61</sup> Now in addition to the Muses of Painting and Poetry (and, perhaps by association, Fame), Watelet invokes a third female figure, Venus, to aid his authorial and artistic efforts. Watelet's specification "Urania" signals a type of Venus associated with sacred rather than profane love. The choice also establishes a hierarchy between the immaterial inspiration of Venus-Urania and the material figure of the Medici Venus, who is more closely associated with profane love and female sexuality.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, the name connotes Urania the muse of astronomy, which strengthens the relationship between Watelet's compass as a tool employed in mapping and his invocation of the goddess affiliated with celestial navigation. In the footnote Watelet articulates Venus-Urania's divine association by connecting her to the goddess Celeste, who Diderot explains in the *Encyclopédie* was worshiped in Carthage and often called "queen of the heavens."<sup>63</sup>

As in the portrait, however, Watelet's figuration as an author—"I sing"—is immediately apparent, and Venus is secondary in size and influence. Positioned as an auxiliary figure, she

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<sup>61</sup>Watelet, *L'Art de Peindre*, 3. "Je chante l'Art de Peindre : ô Vénus-Uranie,/ Seconde mes travaux, inspire mon génie,/ Laisse-moi pénétrer dans le Temple des Arts."

<sup>62</sup>Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 138-140.

<sup>63</sup>Denis Diderot, "Celeste" (2:801), *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, eds. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Spring 2013 Edition), Robert Morrissey (ed), <http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/>. "Celeste déesse adorée à Carthage & dans toutes les contrées septentrionales d'Afrique. Elle étoit représentée assise sur un lion, & surnommée la *reine du ciel*."

only helps Watelet fulfill his own intellectual and artistic objectives—“Assist *my* works, inspire *my* genius” (my italics). The relegation echoes the choice of moment illustrated in the frontispieces. Rather than depicting Genius in the process of *being* inspired, submissive to the Muses’ superior guidance, the scene shows Genius proudly displaying a completed *L’Art de peindre*, now an object distinctly associated with the male allegory-author through its placement in Genius’ hands, under his touch. In both image and text, seemingly explicit calls for aid or offers of homage only thinly veil Watelet’s desire to figure himself (or by extension, masculine Genius) as the most active, imaginative agent.

In addition to Watelet’s repeated insertion of the first-person “I” in every section of the book, his decision to pen the four chants in poetic verse constitutes a conscious decision to align the work (and by extension, himself) with the artistry of crafting language in addition to art. Arranged in rhyming couplets, the poem’s lines, organized in stanzas of varying length, contain between nine and thirteen syllables. The topics of each four *chants* oscillate variously among art’s relationship to history, mythology, past great practitioners, and some references to technical production, though these are developed more fully in the later prose entries. As a single example, Watelet’s desire to “enter the Temple of the Arts” employs the French word *pénétrer*, which has specific relevance for both material artistic production and the accumulation of knowledge in the eighteenth century. The 1762 *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* defines *pénétrer* first as a material process—“to pierce, to pass through”—and provides the following examples: “Etching penetrates iron and steel. Oil penetrates materials.”<sup>64</sup> The definition also includes more abstract meanings: “It is used figuratively to speak of a profound knowledge of things, either natural or

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<sup>64</sup>“Pénétrer,” *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, 4th ed. (1762). University of Chicago, ARTFL Dictionnaires d’autrefois Project, <https://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/dictionnaires-dautrefois>. “Percer, passer à travers...*L’eau forte pénètre le fer & l’acier. L’huile pénètre les étoffes.*”

spiritual. Thus one says, *to penetrate the secrets of nature.*<sup>65</sup> This repeated emphasis on Watelet's domination of material and knowledge, both in word and image, underscores the labor necessary to extract and codify the art of painting—a point that further highlights the necessity of Watelet's authorial touch.

Watelet also deploys poetic verse to situate himself within a contemporary history of didactic poems all inspired by Horace's classical *Ars Poetica*. The most prominent of these are the Latin poems *De Arte Graphica* (1668) by Charles-Alphonse Dufresnoy and *Pictura, Carmen* (1736) by Abbé François-Marie de Marsy. The 1761 reprinting of Watelet's poem in Amsterdam makes these influences explicit, as reproductions of both earlier poems were bound with *L'Art de peindre*. Although Watelet's poem represents the first of this sort penned in French, its content echoes much of the earlier works—a fact you will remember Diderot was quick to point out in his critique of the book, that it presented no new knowledge. Thus Watelet's imprinting of poetic form onto existing material represents, at least for Diderot, an unimaginative act of combination, a touch without a trace of inspired genius. Yet, as Marian Hobson elucidates, Diderot's emphasis on the links between enthusiasm, genius, and artistic production is counterbalanced if not contradicted by the most persistent explanation of pleasure in poetry to be found in the first half of the century, that of *difficulté vaincue*.<sup>66</sup> The enjoyment of poetry, according to this theory, lay in appreciating each poem as an answer to a technical problem and in admiring the elegance of the poet's solution. Hobson emphasizes the importance of making an author's labor apparent to

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid. "On s'en sert figurément, en parlant De la profonde connaissance des choses, soit naturelles, soit spirituelles. Ainsi on dit, *Pénétrer les secrets de la nature.*"

<sup>66</sup>Marian Hobson, *The Object of Art: The Theory of Illusion in Eighteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 221.

this interpretation: “To be aware of difficulty is to be all awareness, uniquely attached to poetic form.”<sup>67</sup>

By understanding Watelet’s decision to write in poetic verse in the context of *difficulté vaincue*, his construction and execution of the text directly parallels his performative project in making the engravings—both foreground his technical acumen in the manipulation of existing materials into new forms, whether a new medium in the case of the engravings or a new linguistic structure with the poems. Both components of *L’Art de peindre* fully showcase their subjects’ antecedents—the engravings through Pierre’s signature and the text through its allusions and familiar tropes, such as the opening invocation to Venus. These traces of previous models force the viewer to consider Watelet’s material interventions into their *form* rather than their content in a way that highlights the mechanical and mental powers of their artist-author, whose abilities to transform word and image are on full display in every aspect of the book. The following, final section of this project now considers how Watelet’s representation of himself as a manipulator of material form in *L’Art de peindre* participates in larger discourses on the representation and codification of knowledge gained through sensory experiences in eighteenth-century France.

### **From Sensation to Representation: The Codification of Knowledge**

The notion of experience in eighteenth-century France derived from two quite different accounts of sensibility, which arose in part from the very ambiguity in the French verb *sentir*. One, propagated by the *philosophes*, reflected a sensorial orientation to learning. The other, mainly found in Rousseau’s writings, proposed a sentimental orientation to education. The

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

concept of sensorial knowledge stems in part from seventeenth-century corpuscular theories of matter—notably those posited by Pierre Gassendi, Arthur Boyle, and John Locke—that enabled the development of an empirical psychology based on experience rather than innate ideas.<sup>68</sup>

Writing a generation before most of the French *philosophes*, John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* argued against innate notions to establish an empirical psychology based on experience. Larry Wolff highlights the way Locke invokes both children and the concept of touch as a way to demonstrate his point through the famous tabula rasa analogy of children yet to be imprinted with “obvious and familiar qualities” on their memory.<sup>69</sup>

Building on John Locke’s idea of the mind as a tabula rasa, Condillac sought to study the developmental history of the mind and its earliest impressions not through a child but rather a marble statue. In his *Treatise on the Sensations* from 1754, Condillac hypothesized the role of particular senses through imagining a statue in which only one sense was activated at a time, allowing him to study the particular nature of sense impression and the knowledge of the world that each imparted. On the experience of touch, the *philosophe* writes:

I open my eyes to the light, and I see at first only a luminous, colored cloud. I touch, I advance, I touch again: insensibly, a chaos unscrambles before my gaze. Touch in some way decomposes light; it separates colors, distributes them upon objects, brings out a lighted space, and in this space of sizes and figures, conducts my eyes to a certain distance, opens to them the road by which they must be carried far upon the earth, and be raised up to the heavens: before them the universe unfolds.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>John O’Neal, *Changing Minds: The Shifting Perception of Culture in Eighteenth-Century France*, 22.

<sup>69</sup>Larry Wolff, “When I Image a Child: The Idea of Childhood and the Philosophy of Memory in the Enlightenment,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 31.4 (1998): 382.

<sup>70</sup>Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Traité des Sensations* (Tours: Fayard, 1989), 254-5. Quoted and translated in Wolff, “The Idea of Childhood,” 389.

Consider Condillac's passage in relation to characterizations of the artist's touch, which Watelet articulated as an imitative and expressive sign. Here, we see an analogous dichotomy: touch is first expressive in the sense that its end is not premeditated. This process, however, leads to knowledge about forms and, ultimately, the development of mental powers to make sense of the information obtained. Condillac explains this transition as the moment of recognizing the effect of natural signs, which enables an individual to reproduce them as artificial signs.<sup>71</sup> The socialized imagination thus created can then conjure from signs stored in memory the perception or simple idea associated with that sign. Once memory and imagination are working together, the stage is set for the most important of imagination's power—that of combining simple ideas to form more complex ones.<sup>72</sup>

In the passage quoted above, however, touch does not operate in isolation as an end to the development of semiotics, as it would in his ideal example of the statue coming to life. It relies on sight as the initial means to sense the existence of things outside the self. Condillac of course cannot physically touch the universe unfolding in front of him. But he uses the conflation of sight and touch as a rhetorical device. This sensorial interchange is similar to the circumstances of Watelet's portrait by Greuze—only by sight are we the viewers able to then make sense of the implied narrative of touch between Watelet and Venus, a physical encounter that itself has not

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<sup>71</sup>Condillac writes on this crucial moment in relation to aural signs in his earlier *Essay on the Origins of Human Knowledge*: “With regard to natural cries, this man shall form them, as soon as he feels the passions to which they belong. However they will not be signs in respect to him the first time; because instead of reviving his perceptions, they will as yet be no more than consequences of those perceptions. But when he has often felt the same passion, and as often broke out into that cry which accompanies it, both will be so strongly connected in his imagination, that he cannot hear the one without experiencing in some measure the other. Then it is that this cry becomes a sign” (I.ii.4.52)

<sup>72</sup>Mary Sheriff, “Passionate Spectators: On Enthusiasm, Nymphomania, and the Imagined Tableau,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 60.1 (1997): 54.

yet occurred. Or may have never occurred. The limitations of touch as the only framework to interpret a painting become apparent; whereas touch can tell us about the material properties of painting and, as an index, the presence (and perhaps feelings) of the artist, it can make no claims about the image's illusionistic qualities. Sight must also be activated to make sense of the scene's subject, though it then has no way of verifying the material existence of the object as a trace. For Condillac then, both senses function, together, as ways to know *existing* forms and, theoretically, to create artificial signs using imagination. But how do these ideas play out in the physical execution of new artistic forms?

Lajer-Burcharth argues the problem of the touch-sight binary is unavoidable in artistic creation. Because the artist paints up close, hand on the canvas, and only occasionally draws back to view the effort at a distance, she explains, touch and sight are not experienced as unified in the process of making, though a viewer may fantasize otherwise. Rather, this process necessitates a split, a constant oscillation between touch and sight, object and subject:

This back and forth movement—toward and away from canvas—describes a hazardous trajectory in which both an object and a subject are at risk of incompleteness: incompleteness as a threat of invisibility for the object (the underarticulated object that fails to 'take,' to make an appearance on the stage of representation); and the incompleteness as a challenge to the painter confronted with the specter of failure to make it appear on canvas, to pull the image off.<sup>73</sup>

The temporal incompatibility of touch and sight is a problem for Condillac, too, as the knowledge about the world they provide through sensation is, by definition, tethered to a specific experience in space and time. Only with the introduction of memory, the mental faculty designed to store such sensations, can the two senses then function simultaneously; with memory, imagination develops and can then combine simple ideas to form more complex ones.

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<sup>73</sup>Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "The Object as Subject," in *The Lure of the Object*, ed. Stephen Melville (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 166-7.



Thus, this conscious manipulation of sensorial knowledge into new combinations constitutes another nuance of an artist or intellectual's "touch," and Watelet undoubtedly performs this process in the curation and assemblage of *L'Art de peindre*. Condillac writes: "We do not properly create any ideas; we only combine, by composing and decomposing, those which we receive by the senses."<sup>74</sup> He then sets up a hierarchy within invention, writing: "Invention consists in knowing how to make new combinations: there are two kinds of it; talent and genius. Talent combines the ideas of an art, or of a science, in such a manner as is proper to produce those effects, which should naturally be expected from it....Genius adds to talent the idea in some measure of a creative mind."<sup>75</sup> The talented combiner rearranges things in an expected, though nonetheless helpful, fashion, whereas the genius takes combination beyond the former and invents the unexpected.

This distinction again refers to Diderot's criticism of Watelet's project, that it only contained information *already known* and therefore lacked any kind of genius. But by including Watelet in his *Encyclopédie* project, Diderot recognized his talent for articulating aspects of art theory and effectively representing knowledge about the external world. Such skills fit squarely within Diderot and Jean d'Alembert grand ambitions for the *Encyclopédie*, articulated by the latter in the first volume's *Discours Préliminaire*:

The work whose first volume we present today has two objects: as an *Encyclopédie*, it is to set forth as well as make possible the order and connection of human knowledge: as a *Dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts & des Métiers*, it is to contain the general principles that form that basis of each science and each art, liberal or mechanical, and the most essential facts that make up the body and substance of each."<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Condillac, *Essay*, I.ii.104, 97.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>Jean le Rond d'Alembert, *Discours Préliminaire des Éditeurs* (June 1751), *Encyclopédie*. "L'Ouvrage dont nous donnons aujourd'hui le premier volume, a deux objets: comme

This characterization makes clear that Diderot and D'Alembert designed the project to facilitate the dissemination of existing, albeit scattered knowledge, by giving it an intelligible *form*, a material existence made possible through an imaginative, yet combinatory production.

I propose in conclusion that Watelet capitalizes most from his *talent* not for ingenious imagination, but rather for combination, which is still a process requiring a highly materialized version of imagination in the invention of new forms. He retraces, reforms, and reorganizes knowledge about himself and art theory throughout *L'Art de peindre* in a way that consistently draws attention to his hand, his unique touch. Although Diderot explicitly bars Watelet's vein of touch from the realm of genius, its function as a representation or trace of Watelet the man provided him access to the highest institutional realms of French cultural production. Similarly, as a representation of knowledge, *L'Art de peindre* later informed some of the most influential codification projects of the century. In this way, Watelet exemplifies the double experience of touch, in the sense that every tactile perception reminds us of the body part engaged in producing it.

But (because there is always a trailing *but...*), Derrida writes that for Condillac—and perhaps also for my study of Watelet's representation—“Apparently, everything returns to a theory of genius.”<sup>77</sup> Even though, as I have argued, Watelet's touch on the engravings, the poems, and Greuze's portrait all signal his talent for combinatory imagination, the trace of

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*Encyclopédie*, il doit exposer autant qu'il est possible, l'ordre & l'enchaînement des connoissances humaines: comme *Dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts & des Métiers*, il doit contenir sur chaque Science & sur chaque Art, soit libéral, soit mécanique, les principes généraux qui en sont la base, & les détails les plus essentiels, qui en font le corps & la substance.”

<sup>77</sup>Jacques Derrida, *The Archeology of the Frivolous, Reading Condillac*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1973), 63.

Genius remains. In the frontispieces' conflation of Enlightened allegory and author, in the opening line—"inspire mon génie!"— of the *chant* to Design, in the creation of a *monument more durable than bronze*, insidious suggestions of genius frustrate my own codification efforts. The *amateur* himself acknowledges their existence, even instructing the Muses in his frontispieces to follow *les traces* of Genius upward into *la lumière*. Yet today these material remnants of this tension between talent and genius, *amateur* and artist, are just that—material. And as such, their physicality, through contrast, highlights the absence, the immateriality, of their signified—Watelet. Indeed, what becomes of Watelet, both as a once-living corporeal body and as an authored material corpus?

### **Epilogue (An Experiment with Ruins)**

Derrida's first-person narration in *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins* provides a provocative parallel through which to grapple with Watelet's self-authorship. Occupying a position in an artistic hierarchy not unlike Watelet's double marginalization as an *amateur* and a printmaker, Derrida writes with a repressed franticness:

I suffered seeing my brother's drawings on permanent display, religiously framed on the walls of every room. I tried my hand at imitating his copies: a pitiable awkwardness confirmed for me the double certainly of having been punished, deprived, cheated, but also, and because of this even, secretly chosen. I had sent to myself, who did not yet exist, the undecipherable message of a convocation. As if, in place of drawing, which the blind man in me had renounced for life, I was called by another *trait*, this graphics of invisible words, this accord of time and voice that is called (the) word—or writing, scripture. A substitution, then, a clandestine exchange: one *trait* for the other, a *trait* for a *trait*. I am speaking of a calculation as much as a vocation, and the stratagem was almost deliberate, by design. Stratagem, strategy—this meant war. And the fratricidal watchword: *Economie du dessin*. Economizing on visible drawing, on drawing as such, as if I had said to myself: as for me, I will write, I will devote myself to the words that are calling me. And even here, you can see very well that I still prefer them; I draw nets of language about drawings, or rather, I weave, using *traits*, lines, staffs, and letters, a tunic

of writing wherein to capture the body of drawing, at its very birth, engaged as I am in understanding it without artifice.<sup>78</sup>

A *trait* for a *trait*. By highlighting his manipulation of existing form—here the “*traits*, lines, staffs, and letters” of writing, (but for Watelet, engraving and poetic language)—as a conscious *strategy*, Derrida situates this notion of *design* not in the realm of invention via creative genius (as in Pierre’s “original” “designs”) but as a cognitive tactic, *by design*. I recuperate the term for Watelet, too, who though not the originator of the ideas about painting and the images in *L’Art de peindre* is nevertheless their *designer*, their director-producer, their pageant master.

And he is a revengeful designer, cognizant like Derrida of others with superior talent (perhaps even, that holy grail, *Genius!*), these the very people with whom he shares pens, papers, tea at le Moulin-Joli, those to whom he cedes the Prix de Rome spotlight, his reading of *L’Art de peindre* no match for the gleaming canvases of these imagined, rivalrous siblings. Thus the need to abandon the traditional stakes—*mere* drawing—and to emulate, to outdo, through other means—drawing *over*, drawing as writing; yes, an ingenious strategy. Derrida’s translators, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass, explain that the phrase “*Economie du dessin*” connotes both economy of drawing and doing without drawing—managing with drawing and managing without it.<sup>79</sup> What is *L’Art de peindre* other than this exercise as such, Watelet’s performance of “draw[ing] nets of language about drawing [read: *painting*],” a weaving together of material “*traits*, lines, staffs, and letters” as a clandestine exchange (combination? retracing?) of others’ touches for his own?

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<sup>78</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 37-38.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, 37 (footnote ‡).

But even as such, does Watelet's touch, this book as the materialized design of self, constitute a representation of the man, a self-portrait without drawing? "Imitation," Derrida writes, "is therefore at the same time the life and death of art. Art and death, art and its death are comprised in the space of the *alteration* of the originary *iteration* (*iterum*, anew, does it not come from Sanskrit *itara*, other?); of repetition, reproduction, representation; or also in space as the possibility of iteration and the exit from life placed outside of itself."<sup>80</sup> Yet even with this knowledge, the impossibility of the original yet mimetic drawing, Derrida emphasizes the ideal's unrelenting allure: "Doing without drawing then. Yet drawing always returns. Does one ever give it up? Does one ever get over drawing, is one ever done mourning it?"<sup>81</sup> And the self-portrait, above all, becomes the site for this collision of desperate longing and inescapable mourning, as it makes painfully apparent the incompatibility of simultaneous self-sight and the tracing of self through touch: "The *traits* of a self-portrait are also those of a fascinated hunter," one whom the prey necessarily eludes.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, the status of the self-portrait of the self-portraitist will always retain a hypothetical character, "like a ruin that does not come *after* the work but remains produced, *already from the origin*, by the advent and structure of the work.... Thoughtful memory and ruin of what is in advance past, mourning and melancholy, the specter of the instant."<sup>83</sup>

In Greuze's portrait, beneath the glimmering fabric and precise coiffure, Watelet occupies a Sartrean *huis-clos* triangle, pinned between a drawing that is not his own and a

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<sup>80</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 209.

<sup>81</sup>Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 39.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, 65, 69.

sculpture that shields her body from his eyes. Thus, even when surrounded by signifiers of his supposed artistry and scholarship, Watelet's role, the clarity of his representation, is imprecise. As if equally aware of this ambiguity, Watelet's painted visage points the compass to his chest in a gesture that mimics Galatea's question of selfhood—*moi?* In the pursuit of one's self-portrait, Derrida writes, "there is nothing of the totality that is not immediately opened, pierced, or bored through: the mask of this impossible self-portrait whose signatory sees himself disappearing before his own eyes the more he tries desperately to recapture himself in it...the subject of the self-portrait becomes fear, *it makes itself into fear, makes itself afraid.*"<sup>84</sup>

Perhaps the pieces of *L'Art de peindre*, the conspicuously signed engravings, the first-person perspective of the poetic verse, even the somewhat fearful-looking figure in Greuze's portrait, can be conceptualized more clearly within this framework of the impossible self-portrait. Not *re-presentations* of an established, known self, they may be alternatively various attempts to signify a self *into* a material existence, a grappling of identity worked out in tactile and illusionistic terms. Using touch, Watelet compiles a new material corpus through these physical traces, which offer a sort of immortality to his artistic and authorial efforts. But as Lajer-Burcharth and Derrida both elucidate, the simultaneity of touch and sight in artistic creation is an impossibility, a fantasy. Watelet's blind (over?)-reliance on touch in fact makes the spectre of incompleteness manifest in this material reincarnation—a Frankensteinish hodgepodge of engraved lines, clotted oil, and printed letters. Is this (are these?) Watelet? Because even as these traces insist on his previous presence, they in fact highlight his current absence. And so the portrait is an illusion. We, the current viewer, are separated eternally from the man and his corporeal body—Watelet becomes no more than that word, *Watelet*.

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<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 69-70.

Such an erasure of the “original” body, however, and the sole survival of the derivative trace parallels the way in which the lack of extant drawings by Pierre force Watelet’s engravings to be evaluated on their own terms, as both are the solitary surviving “finished” works. Even though these material traces of Watelet highlight his absence, point to his non-existence, they remain the only physical means by which we can evaluate his *performance* of self, as the man himself provides nothing else as a comparison. So from his ruins, we rebuild; we, too, imagine and combine. And in the end, Watelet nevertheless occupies the role of designer—though perhaps a blind one—in his *L’Art de peindre* performance because, as Derrida himself acknowledges, “what one cannot see one can still attempt to reappropriate, to calculate the interest, the benefit, the usury. One can describe it, write it, stage it.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 70.

## FIGURES

Figure 1 – Claude-Henri Watelet and Jean-Marie Baptiste Pierre, Frontispiece, *L'Art de peindre*, 1760. Engraving. Photo: University of North Carolina Rare Book Collection.



Figure 2 – Watelet and Pierre, Frontispiece, *L'Art de peindre*, 1760. Engraving. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Littérature et art.





Figure 3 – Hubert François Gravelot, Charles Nicolas Cochin, and Charles-Etienne Gaucher, “Génie,” *Iconologie par figures*, 1791. Photo: Getty Research Institute.



Figure 4 – Gravelot, Cochin, and Gaucher, “Gloire,” *Iconologie par figures*, 1791. Photo: Getty Research Institute.

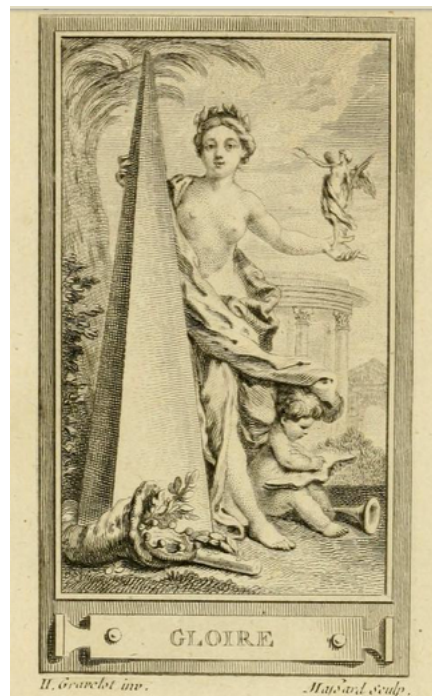


Figure 5 – Watelet and Pierre, Vignette accompanying *Chant to Design*, *L'Art de peindre*, 1760. Engraving. Photo: University of North Carolina Rare Book Collection.



Figure 6 – Watelet and Pierre, Vignette accompanying *Chant to Color*, *L'Art de peindre*, 1760. Engraving. Photo: University of North Carolina Rare Book Collection.

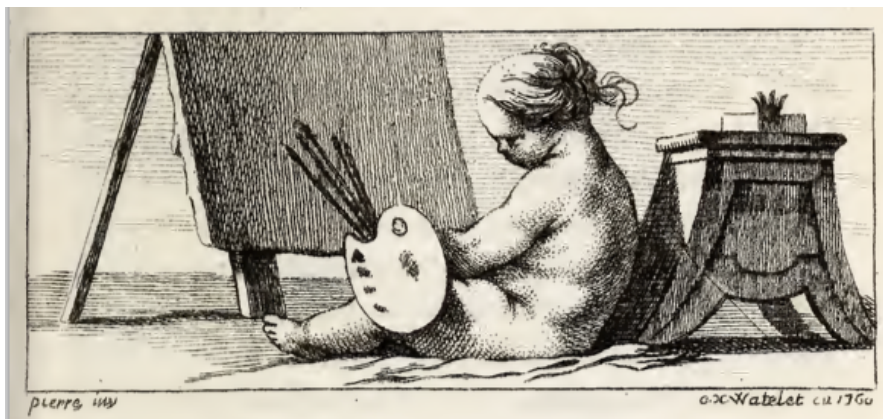


Figure 7 – Watelet and Pierre, Vignette accompanying *Chant to Picturesque Invention*, *L'Art de peindre*, 1760. Engraving. Photo: University of North Carolina Rare Book Collection.





Figure 8 – Watelet and Pierre, Vignette accompanying *Chant* to Poetic Invention, *L'Art de peindre*, 1760. Engraving. Photo: University of North Carolina Rare Book Collection.



Figure 9 – Watelet and Pierre, Vignette accompanying *Chant* to Design, *L'Art de peindre*, 1760. Engraving. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Littérature et art.



Figure 10 – Watelet and Pierre, Vignette accompanying *Chant* to Color, *L'Art de peindre*, 1760. Engraving. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Littérature et art.



Figure 11 – Watelet and Pierre, Vignette accompanying *Chant* to Picturesque Invention, *L'Art de peindre*, 1760. Engraving. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Littérature et art.

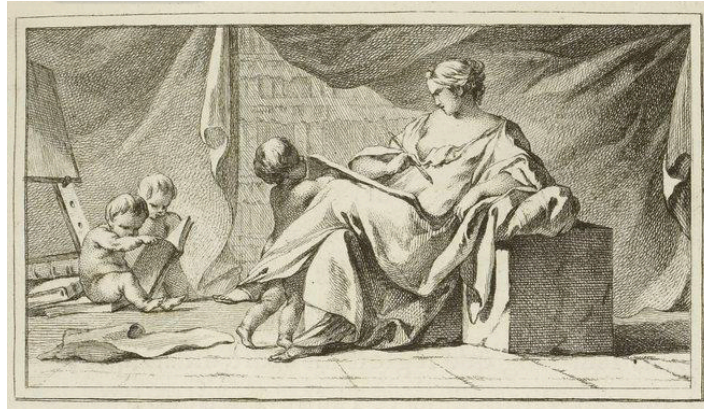


Figure 12 – Watelet and Pierre, Vignette accompanying *Chant* to Poetic Invention, *L'Art de peindre*, 1760. Engraving. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Littérature et art.



Figure 13 – Watelet, Pierre, and Marguerite Le Comte, *Cul-de-lampe* concluding *Chant* to Design, *L'Art de peindre*, 1760. Engraving. Photo: University of North Carolina Rare Book Collection.





Figure 14 – Watelet and Pierre, *Cul-de-lampe* concluding *Chant to Color*, *L'Art de peindre*, 1760. Engraving. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Littérature et art.



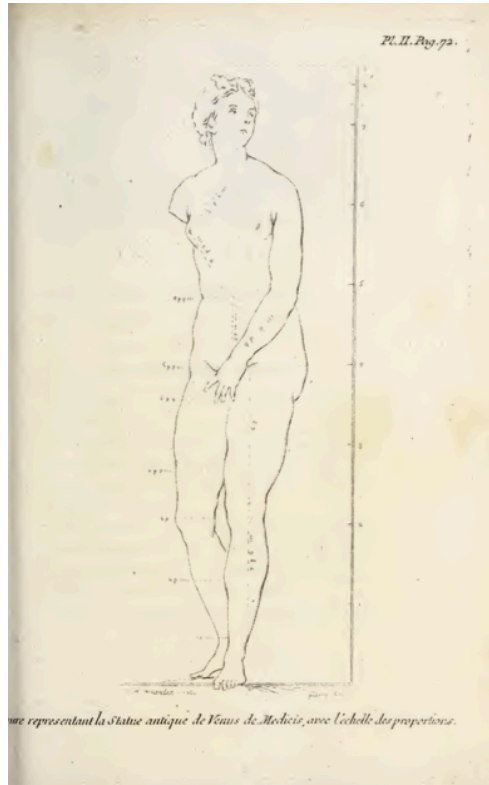
Figure 15 – François Boucher, *Madame de Pompadour* [Munich Portrait], 1756. Oil on canvas. Alte Pinakothek. Photo: ARTstor.



Figure 16 – Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Portrait of Monsieur Watelet*, 1763-5. Oil on canvas. Louvre. Photo: ARTstor.



Figure 17 – Watelet and Pierre, “Medici Venus,” *L’Art de peindre*, 1760. Engraving. Photo: University of North Carolina Rare Book Collection.



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