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ROCAILLE ORNAMENTAL AGENCY AND THE DISSOLUTION OF SELF IN THE ROCOCO ENVIRONMENT

Julie Boivin

Abstract

In current and past art-historical studies, there has been almost no consideration of the haptic qualities of rocaille ornamentation. By considering the agency of this type of ornamentation, the potential affect it has on its participants and the relations created between it and its viewers, this essay presents a materialist reading of 18th-century rocaille ornament in which a bodily form of knowledge is recuperated. Describing the type of matter depicted in the ornaments as one of heterogeneous organic shapes and analysing how these forms create visual networks that incorporate the participant, it is argued that boundaries between such a binary as subject-object are rendered fluid and that the conception of separate entities, such as furniture-viewer, disintegrate. Using Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh, the essay advances that rococo ornamentation can be considered both radical and also thought of as prosthetics extending the notions of a circumscribed body and self.

Keywords: ornament, rococo, rocaille, mirrors, 18th-century visual culture, François-Thomas Mondon, Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier, Jean-François Bastide, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, affect
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Biographical note

Julie Boivin holds a Ph.D. in art history from the University of Toronto. Her thesis addressed ornamentation, particularly of 18th-century French rococo visual and material culture as viewed through the lens of contemporary body-horror visual culture. She has written articles and catalogues on contemporary art and is interested in the ontology of ornament, relations between space, identity, and perception.

Banner image: Photogram of maggots, larvae and flies on bacteria culture in Edgar Lissel's *Bakterium – Vanitas* from his *Bakterium*-series (1999–2001). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)

ROCAILLE ORNAMENTAL AGENCY AND THE DISSOLUTION OF SELF IN THE ROCOCO ENVIRONMENT

Julie Boivin, Independent Researcher

The rococo period is now considered a legitimate period style, but for a long time there was doubt that it could even be viewed as such, being considered rather as a late phase of the baroque. One of the main reasons why rococo is now recognised as a style of its own is because of the particular visual qualities of its ornamentation found on everything from interior decoration to objects and textiles (Kimball, 1943; Minguet, 1966). This ornamentation is described as light, airy, made of 'c' and 's' curves, and often includes shells. But although it is the ornamental aspect of this style which gives it its distinctive flavour, these ornaments, from a materialist standpoint, have suffered from a neglect of scholarly consideration. In fact, since its inception this ornamentation has largely been perceived as marginal and condemned by commentators of the period.[1]

There are several reasons why such ornaments have been disregarded. Firstly, because ornamentation itself, since Adolf Loos' 'Ornament and crime' ([1908] 1998), was relegated to the sidelines of art history in favour of 'less is more' modernist interests.[2] It is only recently that ornament has made a comeback in works such as *Histories of Ornament: From Local to Global* (Necipoğlu & Payne, 2016).[3] Secondly, one prime quality of rococo ornaments and decoration is that not only are they inspired by naturalistic themes, they also look and are arranged in an organic manner. Ironically, Alina Payne suggests that it is precisely these organic physical features, which are found in the ornamentation of various historical periods, that are responsible for the neglect suffered by a close study of rococo ornaments. Payne remarks that while ornament functions not only to create order, critical focus has been on ornaments that do just this, to the point of overshadowing other types (2012).

More recently, some art historians, such as Michael Yonan (2010, 2012) and Mimi Hellman (2010), have paid attention to the material presence of these ornaments and their impact upon viewers.[4] But the general practice has been to consider the socio-cultural context, viewing the decorative style as a product of class dynamics.[5] It is precisely this lack of interest in this type of object that drew my attention as a researcher. This essay therefore attempts to meet the challenge of discussing rococo ornamentation's material presence by considering its visual qualities and the impact they may have on their viewers. Unlike scholars who focus on the cultural meanings of visual culture (the cultural turn), I am interested in this ornamentation's material presence and the sensorial possibilities of what I will argue is a radical form of ornament. This type of analysis aligns itself with what Keith Moxey (2008) has named the 'pictorial' and 'iconic turn', or what Jenni Lauwrens (2012) has called the 'sensory turn' in art history. These types of analyses emphasise the physical properties of art objects rather than their social function and meanings (Lauwrens, 2012). This analysis of rococo ornamentation subscribes to this emphasis on the physical presence of objects over their social meaning since it is the affective power of the materiality of these ornaments that is key to understanding their potential radicality.

In order to understand the potential effect and impact of the physical presence of these objects upon

1 Scholarship prior to the work of Marriane Roland-Michel, Peter Fuhring, and Katie Scott was spent arguing for the legitimacy of discussing the rococo as a separate style in its own right. See the work of Kimball (1943), Minguet (1966), Park (1992) and Brady (1984).

2 For a summary of the rise and fall of ornament, see Massey (2013). In recent years, this tale of the modernist banishment of ornament has been challenged. Alina Payne (2012), for instance, acknowledges the loss of architectural ornaments during modernism but proposes it was replaced by a relationship between architecture and the objects chosen to fill its interior.

3 The two major contributions in the late 20th century that questioned the ornamental and the decorative are E.H. Gombrich's the *Sense of Order* (1979) and Oleg Grabar's *Mediation of Ornament* (1992). Recently there is Debra Schafter's *The Order of Ornament, the Structure of Style* (2003), Christine Buci-Glucksmann's *Philosophie de l'ornement d'orient en occident* (2008), Jonathan Massey's *Crystal and Arabesque* (2009), the works of Thomas Golsenne (Golsenne et al. 2010; Golsenne, 2012), Alina Payne's *From Object to Ornament* (2012), Antoine Picon's *Ornament: The Politics of Architecture and Subjectivity* (2013), and the edited volume *Questions d'ornements: XVe-XVIIIe siècles* (Dekoninck, Heering & Lefftz, 2013).

4 In discussing the materiality of rococo ornaments and their material presence, I am referring here to the reality of their physical form in the physical world, not the materials out of which the ornaments themselves are made. The term materiality therefore here alludes to this physical presence and not the various materials the ornaments are made of.

5 Scott's book *The Rococo Interior* (1995) was seminal in establishing a social context for the consumption and production of rococo decorative arts. However, Scott (2009) has also considered the haptic qualities of these ornaments by using Alois Riegl's theories of haptic-optic space in order to explain the illusion of *rocaille* ornament.

Fig. 7.1: *Ensemble of a Chinese room from hôtel de la Riboisière*, 1755–70. Interior decoration. Musée Canavalet, Paris, France. (Originally located at 62, rue de Bondy, Paris, France.) (Photo: Julie Boivin)

viewers, it is important to spend some time assessing and describing some of the physical qualities of these objects. We will thus begin by first summarising the general physical aspects of this ornamentation and the type of system these form.

The first observations that can be made lead to the identification of a recognisable lexicon of elements comprising rococo ornaments. These recognisable categories include marine life, the organic vegetal world, and exotic animals, such as monkeys, elephants, a variety of birds, and mythical creatures like dragons. Taken together, these animals all shared the trait of being strange, exotic, and relatively unknown to the Western observer. It is important to stress that the overwhelming presence of such animals in the decorative lexicon of the rococo not only represents the strong contemporary interest in zoology but also the general appeal of all things *étrange*, that is, things originating from outside Europe.

There was also a marked penchant for Oriental scenes, what is now called *chinoiserie* or *turquerie*, as well as the inclusion of architectural structures such as stairs, arches, cascades, and fountains (Fig. 7.1). While many of these items can be named and do form loose categories, it is important to recognise the extent to which these are exotic and originate outside the assumed European centre, whether this 'outside' was real or imaginary. It also does not necessarily follow that these examples were well known or understood, nor even experienced first-hand. In the sense that these elements were not yet well known since they were either exotic or imaginary, we can state that much of the identifiable rococo lexicon was comprised of new elements. In other words, most *rocaille* ornaments, if at all identifiable with a signified, were ones that were unfamiliar.

Many *rocaille* shapes are also abstracted from organic, marine or vegetal forms. The 's' and 'c' shapes

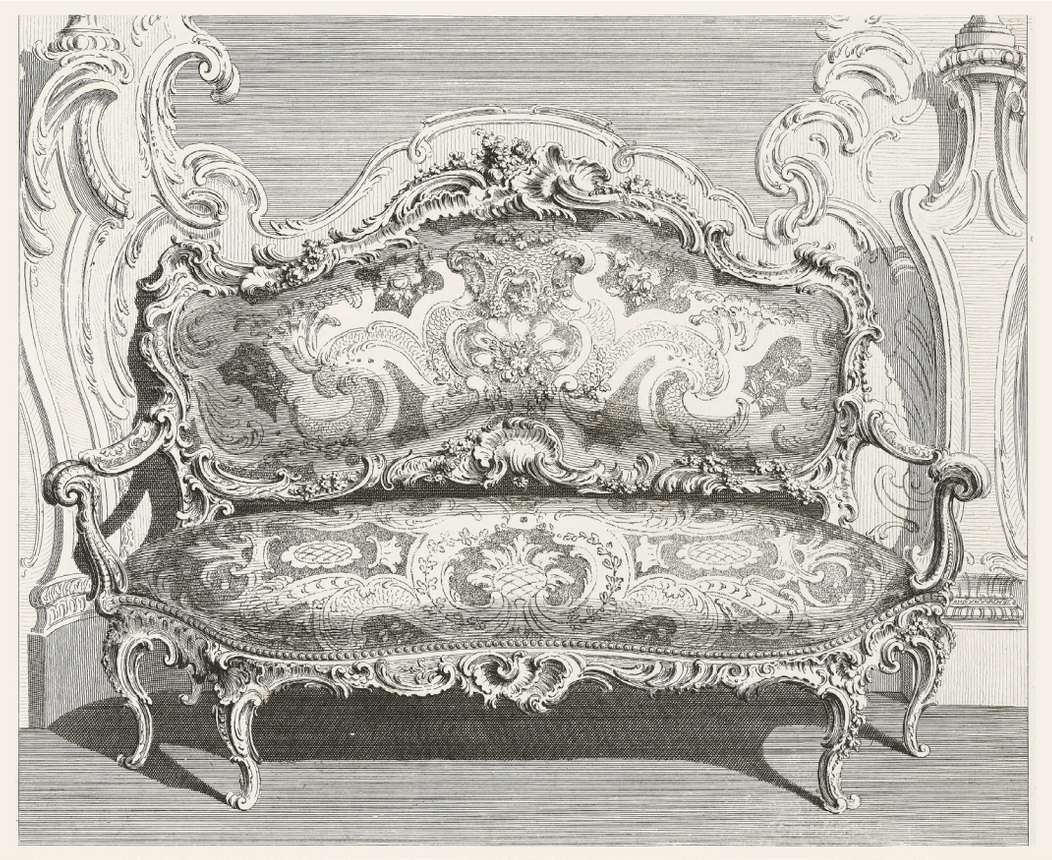

Fig. 7.2: Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier, *Canapé exécuté pour le comte de Bielinski*, 1735. Print, platemark: 31.7 x 36.3cm. (Public domain via Cooper Hewitt (1921–6–212–52))

are two predominant abstract derivatives, which have been recognised by art historians as the major forms composing rococo ornaments. We see this overwhelming 'c' shape in *Canapé exécuté pour le comte de Bielinski*, a print of Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier's design (Fig. 7.2). What is interesting and particular to both these forms is that they invariably distort, convulse, and deform shape, while creating a rhythm of curves and counter-curves. It is also important to stress that these shapes cause asymmetry and create irregular contours, which in turn deform the regular rectilinear order found in other types of decoration.

Porous boundaries and an open framing system

Other than the general types and forms of *rocaille* elements, another particular aspect of this ornamentation is that the manner in which its elements are arranged in space creates a framing system that has porous boundaries. This can be observed in *rocaille* ornamental prints, sometimes known as *morceau de fantasie* or *caprice*, as well as models for cartouches or *cartels*. Specific to these types of ornamental prints is the depiction of a fantastical space with, for instance, fountains and trellises intermingled with nature and odd structures; in this fantastical space, one does not know the beginning from the end, and the foreground and background intermingle. This type of spatial confusion is found in, for example, Mondon's *Le content villageois* and his *Les heures du jour* series, or Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier's designs for watch boxes (Figs. 7.3–7.5).[6]

Because there are porous boundaries we can also qualify the type of framing system that *rocaille* forms as an *open framing* system, since it does not frame to retain or contain, but rather loosely assembles together. This particularity is due to boundaries dissolving between what is framed and the frame itself, and between the outer boundaries of the frame and what lies beyond. Specifically, the lines of such a framing system do not delineate and contain because the linearity of the system is broken by the irregular, curvilinear edges and the forms sprouting in opposite directions. Shapes grow organically out of each other, which causes a lack of pattern coherence, and, since elements are in disequilibrium and at a diagonal axis, a disorderly appearance is created. The 'c' curves respond to each other, like an echo, as though they were complementary pieces of a puzzle, filling each other's creases and gaps, yet not fully connecting.

Such correspondence between elements is found extensively in *rocaille* space and is seen particularly well in the architectural details of wall decorations for

6 See Roland Michel (1979) for a clarification on the proper name of the artist.

Fig. 7.3: François-Thomas Mondon, *Le content villageois*, c.1736. Print. (Public domain via Cooper Hewitt (1921–6–531–15))

Fig. 7.4: François-Thomas Mondon, *Le Tems de la Soirée* in *Les Heures du Jour*, 1738. Print, 55.7cm. (Public domain via Collection numérisées de la bibliotheque de l'Institute national d'histoire de l'art)

the *Cabinet of comte Bielinski* (Fig. 7.6). The end of the painted panel in the *Cabinet* interacts with the bottom dado panelling in a corresponding fashion. The shapes forming the delineation of the putti panel at the very bottom left respond in motion to the curve of the other delineation. Each line in the space of the *Cabinet of comte Bielinski* responds to another element. Either the element is placed to receive the other's movement or to contradict it with a counter-curve. This counter-curve disposition of the elements creates further counter-movements which in turn can contradict each other. In effect, this causes the shapes to seem slippery, gliding between the spaces, which engenders a visual commotion, sending the viewer's sight in one direction and then in the opposite. The overall effect is either one of wave-like movement, where curves unfurl and crash through the space, or one of growth, achieved through the sprouting of foliage and organic decoupling.

The result of having such open boundaries in *rocaille* space is to create visual connections between entities that would otherwise not be connected. Connections between elements belonging to disparate systems occur because the curves in any given system not only respond to each other but also indicate various directions beyond their own system. Consequently,

Fig. 7.5: Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier, *Differents desseins de Tabatières, et pomme de canne, cinquième planche,* 1748. Print, platemark: 22 x 15.5cm. (Public domain via Cooper Hewitt (1921–6–212–20-a))

Fig. 7.6: Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier, *Vue d'angle du même cabinet montrant à gauche une grande fenêtre et à droite le tableau de zéphyr et flore* in *Quinzième livre de l'oeuvre de Meissonnier*, 1742–8. Print, platemark: 51 x 34.5cm. (Public domain via Cooper Hewitt (1921–6–212–46))

the sight of the viewer can travel from one end of a system to another by, so to speak, connecting the dots. More precisely, our gaze follows an invisible web that visually connects curves and counter-curves to each other, whether or not these are meant to connect. Because we see curves continually responding to each other at the micro level, the level of individual elements, we continue to observe responses between curves at the macro level, the level of interaction between distinct systems or objects. While similarities united in repetitive relationships could be called a pattern, those patterns that do emerge within *rocaille* systems are continually broken once their unity opens to connect with other systems. This global connection between various systems at the macro level creates a fluidity in the visual field, which indicates once more the visual presence of a constant movement or commotion.

In Meissonnier's print *Un Project de porte pour madame de Besenval*, we observe in another room beyond an open door the glimpse of a chair and desk (Fig. 7.7). Since these elements are lightly etched, they recede in the background in contrast to what is in the foreground, giving the viewer an illusion of depth. Yet the curves of the chair and desk respond with counter-movements to the 'c'-shaped ornaments at the bottom of the right door panel, thereby negating the division between foreground and background. We also notice that the shape of the chair on the left foreground fits with the curves and form of the adjacent mantel as well as the ornamentation on the panel above. These visual connections cause the individual system of the chair to open up and connect with other systems, such as the mantel and the wall panelling. Again, such connections between various wholes create a visual commotion, one that is amplified, in the case of architectural ensembles and prints depicting them, by the presence of large pier glass mirrors, typically included in rococo decors. Mirrors repeatedly reflect the whole decor at different angles, or sometimes simply recursively, as in the example of the *Salon du prince* at Soubise, and therefore augment the presence of curves and counter-curves, enabling further connections and visual movement (Fig. 7.8). Visual connections such as these can create the perception of a unified and harmonious space. Such an effect, however, does not negate movement or connectivity. To the contrary, it reaffirms how individual systems morph into another and create a sense of a macro whole. Wend Kalnein substantiates this argument when he writes:

> Curves were everywhere. Unity was no longer based on structure but on the interconnection

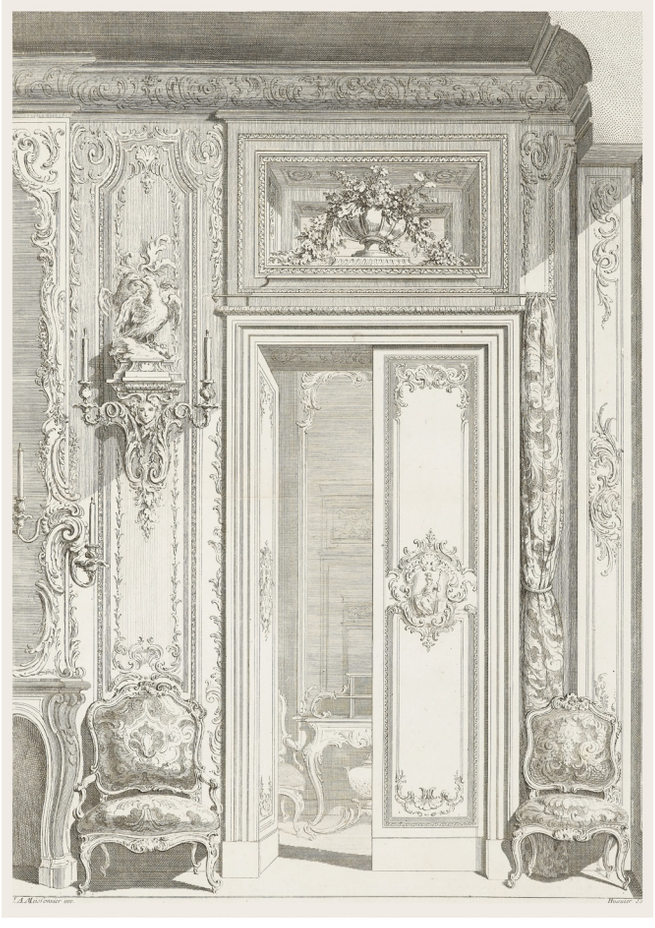

Fig. 7.7: Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier, *Projet de porte pour Madame de Besenval*, 1740. Print, platemark: 50.2 x 33.6cm. (Public domain via Cooper Hewitt (1921–6–212–49))

Fig. 7.8: Germain Boffrand, *Salon du Prince*, 1735–8. Interior decoration. Hôtel de Soubise, Paris, France. (Photo: Julie Boivin)

> of all the parts through a network of lines. Even the firm separation between wall and ceiling disappeared. Decoration began to flow, and the eye no longer found a point of repose.
>
> (1995, p.119)

Meissonnier's print of a *Canapé exécuté pour le comte de Bielinski* is a prime example of individual objects morphing into space. Here we see the *canapé* function not only as a sofa, but also as a further outward extension into the space of the wall ornaments (Fig. 7.2). While the sofa remains an individual entity, the ornaments that constitute its frame nevertheless relate, correspond, and connect to the surrounding wall ornaments. When speaking generally on the rococo style, Patrick Brady in *Rococo Style Versus Enlightenment Novel* agrees that the distinction between entities erodes when

> table and wall are no longer distinguishable, each separately and each from the other, for the table is grafted onto the wall, the table is part of the wall, the table is the wall: who is to say whether a two-legged rococo console is a table or a wall-ornament?
>
> (1984, pp.42–3)

Despite the asymmetrical and heterogeneous aspects of *rocaille* shapes, these ornamental elements can still find echoes of one another through such connective strategies. These examples demonstrate how *rocaille* connections break the independent unity of each part, system, ensemble or even identifiable entities (signifieds), reaching beyond spatial boundaries to reassemble these and create new and momentary chimeric ensembles. Elements and systems of the *rocaille* are not closed and separate entities, but rather they are moments of conjoining during which elements are constantly dismantled and re-assembled. We see, then, how the individuality of forms and signified can be lost when the parts morph with different systems.

On the other side of the looking glass

The special and spatial qualities of rococo ornaments we have just enumerated – their heterogeneous novel and exotic shapes, their connective potential and the open systems they form – have the capacity to transpierce physical space in order to make visual connections and create visual networks. These visual networks also incorporate the viewers within them, thus connecting not only their body to the space around them but also connecting with their imagination to create new spaces. Such ornamental connections or relations occur, as I will detail below, due to the cumulative effect of the actions of these ornaments throughout various levels of interaction.

The first such level of interaction is between the body of the viewer/subject and the real physical ornament in three-dimensional space, such as the sculpted ornaments in the lambris of the *Salon du Prince* at Soubise (Fig. 7.8). Here the ornaments can even be considered sculptural, since they literally project from the walls and are three-dimensional. Such objects can physically be touched and consequently occupy three-dimensional space. But three-dimensional *rocaille* ornaments are not only found as part of wall-panel decorations. These were also present as the legs of elaborate side tables, the frames of pier mirrors, candelabras, firedogs, the toilette service, snuff boxes, *surtout de table*, porcelain figures, bronze casings, and frames that held wall paintings. Three-dimensional *rocaille* ornaments were everywhere and often located in close proximity to the body itself. People literally touched *rocaille* ornaments when resting a hand on a sofa's arm, picking up a snuff box or brush, or re-arranging porcelain trinkets on the mantle. It is understandable why, then, the first link between a viewing subject and *rocaille* ornaments is the three-dimensional realm they both inhabit.

The three-dimensional ornaments also act as a bridge between the body of the participant and the two-dimensional ornaments depicted within the frames of the wall decoration, as those of the *Cabinet des fables de La Fontaine* (Fig. 7.9). Such two-dimensional *rocaille* ornaments were also found in prints, paraphernalia, porcelain decoration, painted on furniture, wall hangings, and all kinds of furniture fabrics or clothing. In the case of wall-panel decorations, these small, painted two-dimensional ornaments literally connect to their three-dimensional counterparts, which also frame them, as we see in the *Cabinet des fables de La Fontaine* (Figs. 7.9 and 7.10). However, since, as explained earlier, the *rocaille* framing system is one of permeability, the spaces between three and two dimensions are not clearly delineated. These spaces can be breached by the connective arrangements of the ornaments, such as the 'c' and 's' shapes. In one of the only restored Dangé panels, we clearly see the interaction of the two levels at work (Fig. 7.10). Looking at the bottom left of the panel, we see one of the twisted three-dimensional ornamental leaves encroach upon the frame, almost touching the painted ornaments. While it appears as though emerging from the sculpted frame, the painted illusory ornaments are in fact laid against the frame, so that, in effect, the third dimension extends into the second, illusory one (Fig. 7.9). The shapes of the painted ornaments also follow the contours of the

Fig. 7.9: Close-up of *Cabinet des fables de La Fontaine*, 1750–5. Interior decoration. Musée des arts décoratifs, Paris, France. (Originally from Hôtel Dangé, 9 place Vendôme). (Photo: Julie Boivin)

sculpted frame, extending the illusion that it is the outer, three-dimensional ornaments that have deployed and bloomed into two-dimensional, multi-coloured ones. More precisely, the ease with which the glance of the viewer may glide into the two-dimensional space is achieved by the echo of the curves and counter-curves seen at the bottom corners of the panel. The frame is here infected by these unknown organic shapes, vegetal grafts that simultaneously attach to, transgress, and transform the frame, in effect rendering it permeable and obviating its function of delineating and separating spaces.

Lastly, in the case of the *Cabinet des fables*, the painted two-dimensional ornaments also surround the central piece of narrative action, a moment in *Les fables de La Fontaine* (Fig. 7.10). The leaves and twigs of grass jut out in arches at the very edges of the vignette, connecting and touching the *rocaille* ornaments. If we follow the curves of the blades of grass which lead us into the vignette, we perpetuate the circular movement of the blue arabesque 'c'-shaped ornament. In this case, *rocaille* ornaments gently interact with the vignette's fantasy to lead us into its narrative imaginary space. These ornaments come to infringe, pierce, enter, and ultimately even constitute a third level of space, that of the imaginary narrative.

But the viewer's involvement within the fantasy goes a step further as the transformative operations of *rocaille*

Fig. 7.10: *Cabinet des fables de la fontaine*, 1750–5. Interior decoration. Musée des arts décoratifs, Paris, France. (Originally from Hôtel Dangé, 9 place Vendôme.) (Photo: Julie Boivin)

continue. For even the central narrative panels, which at first appear to be the main visual narrative, act as a secondary framing device to the ultimate narrative: that of the viewing subject. This fourth spatial effect is not so much caused by the fictitious narrative of the decor, when such painted narratives are present, but rather by the reflections of large pier glass mirrors. Since reception rooms or cabinets with decors could contain up to three pier mirrors, this made it inevitable to see one's own reflection or that of another person.[7] The mirrors not only served to reflect the light and render a room brighter and more luxurious but also to permit the indirect gazing of oneself or others and, I propose, to incorporate the viewer into the decoration. Since it was deemed improper to stare directly at another, Hellman (2011) demonstrated how an elite type of gazing developed, one that was coy, covert, and indirect; pier mirrors aided greatly in this task. In his entry in the *Encyclopédie* on the *cheminée* (fireplace), Jacques-François Blondel (1751–65) remarks that the correct height for a fireplace in salons or rooms for entertaining is less than three and a half feet 'so that those sitting in circle formation around a fireplace may see themselves in the mirrors as well as note what is happening.'[8] Jennifer Milam also explains that the 18th-century architect Charles-François Daviler 'notes that mirrors enabled the viewer to check his appearance while at the same time observing others as they entered and exited the apartment' (2011, p.178). Another useful source, albeit fictitious, is the architectural romance *La petite maison* written by Jean-François de Bastide in 1758. This story provides two noteworthy examples of mirrors being used in the interactions of its protagonists, the Marquis de Trémicourt and the object of his affection, the charming Mélite.

> The day was drawing to a close and the light waned; a valet came to light the thirty candles held by a chandelier and by girandoles of Sèvres porcelain artfully arranged in their brackets of guilded bronze. These thirty candles reflected in the mirrors, and this added brilliance made the salon seem larger and restated the object of Trémicour's impatient desires.
>
> (Bastide, [1758] 1996, p.70)

Bastide points out that the use of mirrors is not only to contribute in lighting the room and in creating the illusion of its bigger size but also to reflect its occupants, in this case Trémicour's object of affection – Mélite. In another example, Bastide is more direct in illustrating the deflected, coy glances Hellmann argues the elite would practise:

> To dispel this fearful thought, Mélite moved away from the Marquis toward one of the mirrors, pretending to readjust a pin in her coiffure. Trémicour stood in front of the opposite mirror, and with the help of this trick was able to watch her even more tenderly, without her having to look away. In seeking a moment's respite from Trémicour's charms, Mélite had fallen into an even deeper trap.
>
> 'Marquis,' she snapped, realizing her mistake,
>
> 'Please stop looking at me! This is becoming quite tiresome.'
>
> (Bastide, 1996, pp.78–9)

These excerpts from *La Petite Maison*, alongside Blondel's comments in the *Encyclopédie* and those of Daviler, demonstrate it was probably common practice to stare at the reflection of others or oneself in the decor's pier mirrors. The very large number of mirrors made such reflections omnipresent, with the result that we must question how these could contribute to, or change, the decorative vision offered to the subject viewing the whole environment. I would like to suggest that mirrors not only served as observational devices, but also helped to incorporate the reflected images of the occupants of a room within the décor, which were in turn observed by the occupants. We can understand this last level of cumulative spatial effects as the insertion of the viewers or participants of the space within a virtual fantasy created in the reflections of mirrors.

Such a virtual fantasy is created by reflecting and flattening real space and participants into another dimension mediated by the ornaments that constitute the frame of the mirrors. The *Chambre de parade de la princesse* at Soubise is a good example of mirrors reflecting and flattening the ornaments within the room, as well as any participant who might stand in the right spot (Fig. 7.11). In this example of a mirror reflection from the *Chambre de parade de la princesse,* we see first that the pier mirror reflects the ornaments of the room. Once captured within the reflection, the ornaments are removed from a three-dimensional space to a two-dimensional image. Subsequently, we note the reflection of the photographer. The distance between the person and the wall ornaments is no longer important, as both are flattened into an image encapsulated within the frame of the mirror.

7 For the use of mirror reflections in salons, see DeJean (2009).

8 'afin que ceux qui forment cercle autour du foyer y étant assis, puissent se voir dans les glaces & y remarquer ce qui se passe.' (Translation by the author).

Fig. 7.11: Mirror reflection of part of body in Germain Boffrand, *Chambre de parade de la princesse*, 1735–8. Interior decoration. Hôtel de Soubise, Paris, France. (Photo: Julie Boivin)

Fig. 7.12: François-Thomas Mondon, *Livre de trophée*, c.1736. Print. (Public domain via Cooper Hewitt (1921–6–531–12))

Consequently, the real ornaments in the room, along with those in the mirrors, re-frame the participants to become part of a merger between the real space of the room and the reflected, imaginary space in the mirrors. We can consider such reflections as illustrating imaginary space, since they are flat and become images removed from real space. Reflected bodies thus assemble with the ornaments and, just as in the Mondon prints of *Le content villageois*, *Le tems de la soirée,* and *Puzza tenant son fils Horus*, merge with *rocaillesque* ornaments (Figs. 7.3–7.4, 7.12–13). We see this in the *Chambre de parade de la princesse* where part of the photographer's body is captured and severed by the ornaments (Fig. 7.11). Its reflection is merged with the outside ornaments of the frame as well as those of the background ornaments. Just as in Mondon's print *Le contant villageois*, the reflected body recedes into the planes of space and its only anchors to the seemingly real space are the *rocaille* ornaments of the mirror frame with which the body interacts (Fig. 7.3).

The ornaments' capacities to create effects that merge different levels of space together, such as the three-dimensional space, the two-dimensional, the fictional, and the reflective, is literally illustrated by Mondon in his *Le tems de la soirée* (Fig. 7.4). Here

Fig. 7.13: François-Thomas Mondon, *Puzza tenant son fils Horus Divinitéz que préside aux grains et fruits Chez les Chinois*, 1736. Print, platemark: 23.3 x 17.8cm, sheet: 31.9 x 23.5cm. (Public domain via Cooper Hewitt (1921–6–366–13))

Mondon depicts quite explicitly how *rocaille* forms can seamlessly transition without any visual interruptions from their position as framing structures to being part of the narrative vignette. By exposing a flexible ornamental framework that fuses different levels of space, the print demonstrates how it is possible for pier-glass mirrors to reflect the daily, real-life activity of the elite and recast it as part of the decorative whole. In a real rococo environment, the ornaments of the room frame the reflected bodies, offering real-life tableaux of the events unfolding in these spaces, exactly like the *rocaille* ornaments in *Le tems de la soirée* (Fig. 7.4). What is particular about Mondon's prints is that they represent visually how it is possible for these ornaments' actions to establish pathways and means of communication that act as a transit system for the viewing subject to access various levels of spaces.

By re-framing viewing subjects so that they become flattened decorative characters themselves, the mirrors remove viewers from three-dimensional space and transform them into active participants of the ornamental environment. Like the painted characters that are integral to the decorative scheme, such as those that are found in the work of Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1720–3) for the Château de Voré, the reflected subject, en-framed by the reflected ornaments, becomes a participating character integral to the ornamental scheme. In such painted decorative panels, characters occupy a particularly central position framed by delicate arabesques that interweave between the space of the panel and that of the fictional, illusory scene. In a similar manner, the reflections of the room's occupants are also ensconced in ornament. As such, they become part of fictional vignettes, in which characters are set apart from real space and yet, by way of the ornaments, are nonetheless still connected to it. By means of the reflections and ornaments viewers are sutured to a fictional space, where they become the main narrative subject within it. Through this process, we understand how the reflected images of the mirrors become like films watched by avid, elite participants, who coyly gaze at them from distant and hidden angles, just as the Marquis de Trémicourt connivingly watched Mélite's reflection. Through the reflections of the mirror, the viewing subject is not only the new subject matter of the decoration but also becomes another object in the decor.

As we have seen, once spatial boundaries collapse, ornaments can slip into different systems, while subjects can become part of networks. Such a collapse of spatial boundaries suggests the potential for a new type of space or new types of relations to space. In his many prints, Mondon, like other artists such as Jacques Lajoüe or Juste-Aurèle Meissonier, proposes a type of space which illustrates the interconnectivity of the body with *rocaille* ornaments. Mondon in particular made explicit the link between sociability and interior decoration by creating what we could deem a *rocaille* fantasyscape, where the living merge with *rocaille* space to become one and the same. Mondon's prints depict the subject merging with ornaments just as the real-life subject merges with ornaments in the fantasies that occur in the mirror's reflections (Figs. 7.3–7.4, 7.12–7.13). Consequently, such fantasy prints can serve to illustrate the merging of imagination with real space and show how such *rocaille* spaces might potentially be perceived when experienced as wholes through interconnection with the ornaments.

Flesh and prostheses

The concept of flesh developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty can help us further understand how the viewing subject comes to participate in the decor. First, we must understand that, for Merleau-Ponty (2004), sight has the capacity not only to see but also to palpate, envelope, and espouse visible things. In other words, sight touches. This is an important point as it implies that the viewing subject of *rocaille* can touch by the mere act of seeing. It is therefore also by seeing that the subject is linked to the three-dimensional ornaments. Merleau-Ponty explains that, by the simple fact that we are capable of seeing, we also have a corporeality that can be seen. Should one be capable of seeing implies that one participates in the real world, and that one is also a palpable entity that can be seen. For Merleau-Ponty, therefore, vision embodies us, and because we are embodied beings, made of a visible outer layer, we are linked to other bodies, other objects. Merleau-Ponty's concept of double visibility is key here because this inherent condition of being, this visibility, is exaggerated in rococo space. In the *rocaille* space, the mirrors transform the seer from seeing to being seen. Our reflections in the mirrors make explicit and exaggerate our condition of double visibility. By being incorporated within the decor through the mirror's reflections, the viewing subjects also become objectified.

The term Merleau-Ponty uses to express his concept of double visibility is flesh. He understands flesh as a sort of frame, a means of perceiving, both a lens that allows us to sense and see, and an outer surface materiality that allows us to be seen. A difficult concept to define, Merleau-Ponty's flesh is both sensing and sensed, visible and partly invisible; it links the subject to the object, embodies our minds into our outer material selves; it creates links to the outer visible world. Flesh

is not the degree of separation between things, but what unites us to things (Merleau-Ponty, 2004). It is the degree of closeness of communication. The radicality of *rocaille* is its ability to make us aware of the state of sensitivity and sensing by transforming subjects into simultaneous objects. It effaces the demarcation between the two. One of its effects is to make us aware of the double quality of flesh.

Because rocaille ornaments allow the subject to transit into an object, it can also be understood as having prosthetic qualities. Although a concrete part of certain people's reality, the prosthesis has also become a social trope, that can help us understand what it means to be post-human (Smith and Morra, 2006). What the prosthesis fundamentally questions is the integrity of an impermeable whole or closed unit. It demands that we question what can be integrated into the whole and yet not entirely subverted by it, what it means to be a closed whole, what it means to have an identity, and what can change and reshape that identity. It further questions the notion of origin and brings to the forefront the idea that we may all be assemblages – composite beings.[9] Prostheses extend and stretch the definition of a unified identity into a multiplicity of beings (Wilson, 1995).

I would like to suggest here that prostheses are not only the replacement of a body's lack in the conventional sense, but can also be an add-on, an augmentation, and extension of the capabilities of the body. Prosthetics are elements capable of connecting the two distinct systems of subject and object, and are also capable of breaching the distinction between these. The prosthesis is not just a technological implement that is a go-between, it can also be heterogeneous and foreign matter capable of attaching itself to our private systems and rendering the oppositions of private-public and self-other more fluid. If one of the characteristics of a prosthesis is its ability to bridge and breach the boundaries of two separate systems, then *rocaille* ornaments are prosthetic, since these also create networks that bridge entirely separate systems. I propose, then, that we consider *rocaille* ornaments as go-between prostheses. However, I consider these not simply as replacements of other parts, but, rather, and more importantly, as extensions of the body that achieve mergers or connections.

If *rocaille* ornaments have the capacity to act as prostheses, perhaps we could consider them as more than objects that 'decorate'. They also have the agential power to act as transitional vehicles that help subjects or viewers perceive this new spatial formation constituted of both real and imaginary space. In other words, *rocaille* ornaments act as a linking system between the observer and this 'potential space'. Hence, due to the very nature of these ornaments, the mergers or connections they initiate create links and bridges to, what Bittarello (2008) would label, virtual spaces. By connecting viewers to a virtual space, this visual linking system disrupts normal rational space, and, as a consequence, a new space is created where imagination and reality merge. Therefore, one means to understand rococo ornamentation is that it is a relation that can mediate between realities – those of the imagination and those of the physical exterior. The implications of such a view are that a rococo environment can be conceived of as an ensemble that does not fully exist physically, but that is rather partially articulated in the imagination of the viewer. I will even dare to suggest that the whole structure of a *rocaille* environment is not found in real three-dimensional space but rather at the juncture where space meets the imaginary projections of the viewing subject. The particular radical quality of *rocaille* space, I am arguing, is its creation of an environment full of devices that actively incite transitions in space. While the focus of this essay was not on the socio-historical aspects of rococo ornaments, it would be a fruitful path for future research into rococo decors to consider the relational potential of rococo ornament and see how it may have functioned in a time-specific environment with known viewing subjects.

9 See Bennett (2010) for a discussion of assemblages and agency of material things.

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