

ART AND DESIGN IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE: FROM *DESSEIN* TO *DESSIN*

Emma Barker

Abstract

*This essay seeks to trace the origins of the modern notion of design in eighteenth-century France, with reference to the theory and practice of drawing. It explores the particularity of French terminology in this area, showing how the language evolved so as to distinguish the theoretical term, *dessein*, from the practical one, *dessin*, in contrast to English, in which one word, *design*, covers the entire spectrum from conception to realisation. It also examines how drawing was theorised and illustrated in the pages of the great monument of Enlightenment thinking, the *Encyclopédie*. The suggestion here is that, while the *Encyclopédie* distinguished between an academic model of drawing centred on the human figure and its technical uses by manufacturers in the textile trades, it also hints at a conception of design that bridges the gap between theory and practice, art and industry. This essay further explores how a new concern with teaching drawing to artisans led to the establishment of drawing schools across France. Although these schools have been criticised for failing to equip their students with the skills demanded by manufacturers, their teaching was intended to serve the needs of the luxury trades that constituted the great strength of the French economy and may have succeeded in doing so, at least in the case of the Royal Free Drawing School in Paris. In conclusion, while eighteenth-century France is more usually associated with the decorative arts, as distinct from design, it nevertheless produced highly successful designers, such as Philippe de Lasalle, a leading figure in the Lyons silk industry.*

Keywords: art, design, drawing, training, eighteenth-century France, decorative arts

Full text: <https://openartsjournal.org/issue-9/article-2>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2020w02>

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ART AND DESIGN IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE: FROM *DESSEIN* TO *DESSIN*

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The French language lacks any single term that corresponds to design, as it is now understood in the English-speaking world, with the result that 'le design' has had to be borrowed to fill the lacuna. The word gained currency in France after 1962, when a department of industrial design was established at the *École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs* (National Higher School in the Decorative Arts) in Paris. Whereas design, like the cognate Italian word, *disegno*, comprehends both the mental conception of a project and its visual or material realisation, this semantic field is covered in modern French by two distinct terms: *dessein*, which has to do with the mind, and *dessin*, which primarily means a drawing. This short essay explores the specific historical moment, that of France during the second half of the eighteenth century, when this distinction emerged. At the time, drawing was regarded as the crucial basis for achievement in painting, sculpture and architecture, which had first been grouped together in Renaissance Italy under the heading of the three *arti del disegno* (arts of design/drawing) and, by the mid-eighteenth century, had come to be identified as *beaux arts* (fine arts). However, as will be shown here, the ability to draw was increasingly considered to be an indispensable skill not only for practitioners of these prestigious art forms but also for artisans working in industry, above all in textile manufacture, a crucial sector of the French economy. Drawing was thus reconceived during this period in ways that are, in fact, not so far removed from the modern notion of design, associated as it is with product design for industry.

The most important art institution in eighteenth-century France was the *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* (Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture), which was founded in Paris in 1648. The teaching that the *Académie* provided centred on drawing after the human body (male only) in the life class, a practice over which it (at least in theory) exercised a monopoly (Michel, 2018, p.23). Students (all of them male) were only admitted to the life class once they had mastered the basic skills of drawing, which they learned by first copying images of the body, in the form of drawings and prints, and then by drawing sculpted bodies, most

often in the form of plaster casts after antique statues. Contrary to what is often stated, these basic skills were not taught in the *Académie* itself but had to be learned privately from the Academician to whom the student was apprenticed (Michel, 2018, p.243). All three stages of learning how to draw are depicted by the draughtsman, engraver and art theorist Charles-Nicolas Cochin in the first of the plates that illustrate the entry on drawing in the *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des arts et des sciences* (1751–72). (This publication will be discussed further below). On the left of the image can be seen young students copying two- and three-dimensional models under the guidance of drawing masters, while, on the right, more advanced students draw independently from the life model; beneath this scene appears a profile and plan of the drawing school, with rows of benches around the table on which the model posed for the life class (Fig. 2.1). Cochin's image testifies to the way in which drawing had been transformed into a rational, orderly practice, incorporated into and supported by the official structures of the French state (Lajer-Burchard, 2017, p.15).

By the mid-eighteenth century, when this image was produced, drawing had largely been stripped of the intellectual connotations of *disegno*, as it was understood in Renaissance Italy. Originally, the equivalent French word, *dessein*, had a similar range of meaning to the Italian one, embracing both the conceptual and the practical. According to the seventeenth-century writer and lexicographer, Antoine Furetière, for example, it signified 'project, enterprise, intention ... also the thought one has in the imagination of the order, layout and construction of a picture, a poem, a book, a building ... also said in painting of those images or pictures without colour' (Furetière, 1690, vol. I, n.p.). *Dessein* was defined in much the same terms in the official dictionary of the French language, the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, when its first edition was published a few years later (*Académie française*, 1694, vol. I, p.322). The word was sometimes spelled without an e and gradually the two spellings took on distinct meanings, with *dessein* being reserved for the conceptual dimension while *dessin* was used to refer to the practice of drawing. The latter usage is described as a 'happy innovation' in a late eighteenth-century dictionary (Féraud, 1787, vol. I, p.750), though it can in fact be traced back to at least 1680, when another dictionary condemned the spelling of *dessein* without an e 'as a term of painting' as an unfounded distinction, introduced by 'certain innovators [*quelques modernes*]' (Richelet, 1680, p.236). *Dessin* as a 'term of art', distinct from *dessein*, did not, however, appear

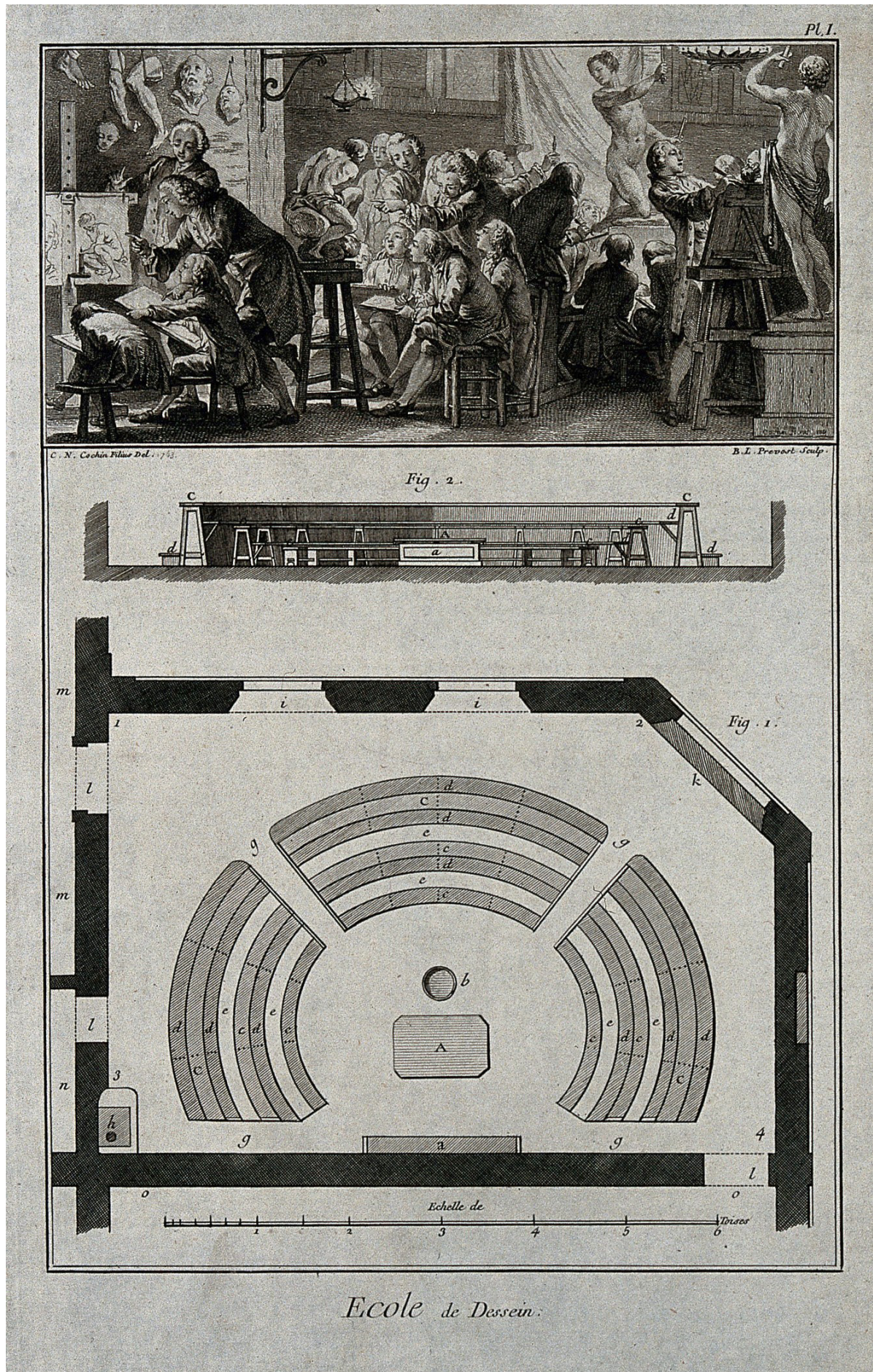


Figure 2.1: Benoît-Louis Prévost, after Charles-Nicolas Cochin, View of a drawing school, its plan and elevation, from *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences des arts et des métiers*, in *Recueil des Planches*, 1772, vol. 3, 'Dessein', Plate I. Etching. (Image credit: Wellcome Collection. CC BY 4.0)

in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* until its fifth edition (*Académie française*, 1798, vol. I, p.410).

The establishment of this distinction is bound up with the debate between the partisans of *dessein* and those of *coloris* (a term that referred to the use and mixing of colour in painting), which took place in and around the *Académie* towards the end of the seventeenth century. The debate echoed the opposition between *disegno* and *colore*, Florence and Venice, that emerged in Renaissance Italy but, in this case, the opposing sides rallied to the cause of a French painter, Nicolas Poussin, and a Flemish one, Peter Paul Rubens, respectively. The partisans of *dessein*, who included the painter Charles Le Brun, the dominant figure in the *Académie* (and its director from 1683), defended the status of their profession as a liberal (free and intellectual) rather than merely mechanical (material and servile) art by aligning painting with *dessein*, which, for them, as for their Italian predecessors, embraced both theory and practice. The leader of the rival camp, the art theorist Roger de Piles, who was made an honorary member of the *Académie* in 1699, challenged the supremacy of *dessein*, instead characterising *coloris* as the 'soul and ultimate achievement of painting' (de Piles, 1668, p.27; Lichtenstein, 1993, p.147; Heck, 2015, p.3). He explicitly distinguished the broadly conceptual dimension of *dessein* from the specifically pictorial one and made clear that he only accepted the latter meaning (Puttfarcken, 1985, pp.44–5; Lichtenstein, 2014, p.226). For de Piles, in short, *dessein* primarily means draughtsmanship; stripped of its former theoretical aspect, it is essentially a technical skill inculcated through careful training, which served to ensure 'accuracy of the eye and facility of the hand' (de Piles, 1708, p.399). The authoritative position that he had gained in French art world by the early eighteenth century (by which time Le Brun was dead) leaves no doubt that de Piles' theory of art helped to shape the definition of *dessin* as distinct from *dessein*.

Although the latter spelling continued to be used to mean both thinking and drawing, discussions of *dessein* with reference to art tended to be largely practical in scope, with little or no theoretical dimension, during the eighteenth century. In volume 4 of the *Encyclopédie*, for example, an entry on *dessein* in the sense of a plan or intention is followed by the article dealing with the word 'as a term of painting' by Claude-Henri Watelet, a wealthy art lover, who was made an honorary member of the *Académie* in 1754. Watelet defines *dessein* firstly as 'the production that the artist realises with a pencil or a pen' and secondly as 'the art of imitating with lines the shapes that objects present to our eyes' (1754, pp.889–90). After dismissing the

theoretical debate over the relative importance of drawing and colour as completely pointless, he devotes most of the article to explaining the three stages of training in draughtsmanship (drawing after images, after sculpture and after the life model) depicted in the plate already discussed (Fig. 2.1). The *Encyclopédie* also contains several other short articles under the same heading, including five that deal with different aspects of textile manufacture. These define *dessein* in a primarily technical sense, with reference to the point-paper plan for setting up threads on a frame (such as a loom) so as to reproduce a freehand drawing supplied by a *dessinateur* (draughtsman or designer) (Diderot, 1754, p.892). Although all of the plates that appear under the heading of *dessein* concern drawing in relation to painting and sculpture, this technical use of the term is illustrated in other plates in the *Encyclopédie*, such as one accompanying the article 'Silk' (Fig 2.2) (Miller, 2004, p.42).

The range of articles that appear under the heading of *dessein* in the *Encyclopédie* is typical of the commitment to assembling, organising and disseminating knowledge about the arts and science that this publication embodied. Its commitment to these goals was in turn based on a belief in the progress that could be achieved by rational enquiry into every aspect of human endeavour that is typical of the Enlightenment. Exemplary in this respect is the *Encyclopédie* article 'Art', by one of its editors, the philosopher Denis Diderot, who also wrote most of the articles about *dessein* as it was used in textile manufacture. In 'Art', Diderot observes that the long-standing distinction between the liberal and the mechanical arts, based on the opposition between the activity of the mind and that of the hand, 'has had the unfortunate effect of giving a bad name to very worthy and useful people'; it is time, he declares, that artisans were rescued from 'the scorn in which prejudice has held them for so long' (1751, p.714, p.717). The mechanical arts, Diderot argues, not only bring about great social and economic benefits, but also require no less mental application than the liberal arts. The examples of such intelligence at work that he cites include 'the frames of braid-makers, gauze-makers, drapers or silk workers' and 'the projection of a design [*dessein*] on to the threads of a simple and from there on to the threads of a warp' (1751, p.717).¹ As well as challenging the distinction between liberal and mechanical arts, Diderot here moves towards a notion

¹ OED: *simple*, 8: weaving, a: 'Each of a set of weighted lines or cords attached to the harness of a draw loom, which are pulled to work particular parts of the harness in sequence'.

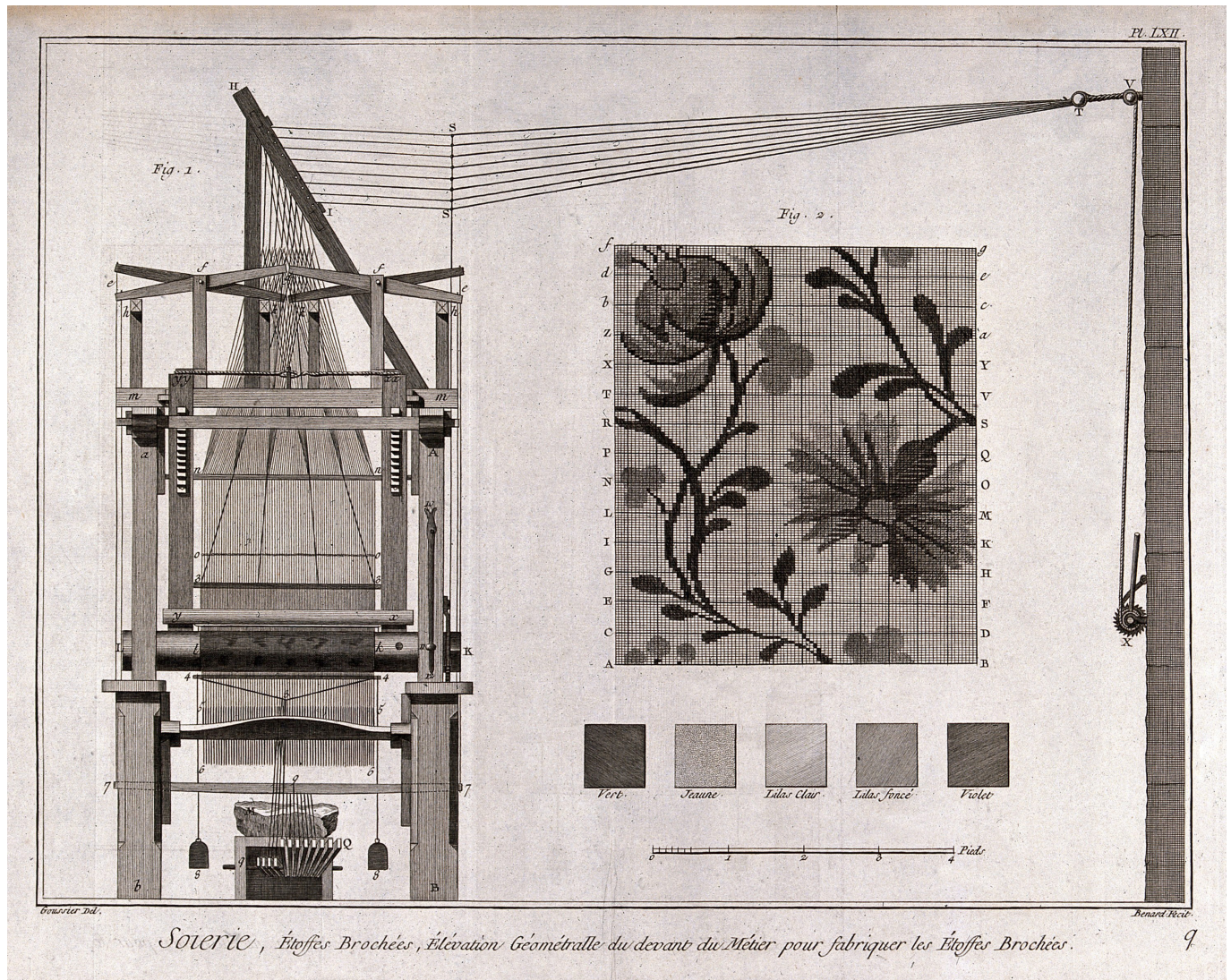


Figure 2.2. R. Benard after L.-J. Goussier, Silk manufacture, brocaded cloth, geometric elevation of the front of the loom and example of a design in five different colours, from *Encyclopédie, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences des arts et des métiers*, in *Recueil des planches*, 1772, 'Soierie', section 3, Plate LXII, Figures 1 and 2. Engraving. (Image credit: Wellcome Collection. CC BY 4.0)

of design as a mediating term between conceptual activity and material production, without ever quite articulating it.

The nearest that the *Encyclopédie* gets to outlining a notion of design in the sense of drawing for manufacture is in the article on *dessein* in architecture. Its author, Jacques-François Blondel, who not only practised as an architect but also ran his own school of architecture, starts by defining it as 'a geometric or perspectival representation on paper of what one has conceived'. However, he does not restrict himself to discussing its specifically architectural application but adds: 'Drawing does not only concern the architect, because by this name one comprehends in general figure, ornament, civil and military architecture'. Blondel insists that it should play a part in education at all levels of society, including 'that of artisans so that they may advance and distinguish themselves in their profession' (1754, p.891). Arguments in favour of teaching drawing,

particularly to artisans, were increasingly widely made in France at the time on utilitarian grounds, for the sake of the artistic, moral, social and economic benefits that would ensue (Benhamou, 1991; d'Enfert, 2003, pp.31–4; Lahalle, 2006, pp.25–44). Antoine Ferrand de Monthelon, a painter, for example, contended that the establishment of schools of drawing in France would not only improve the quality of the mechanical arts by enhancing the skills of workers, so validating them in their own eyes and those of society, but would also thereby enable French products to compete more effectively, 'both within and outside the kingdom, thereby making trade more flourishing' (1746, p.70). Another commentator suggested, by contrast, that French artisans were falling behind their English counterparts, whose designs offered a model of functionality and simplicity that French artists would do well to emulate in order to return the standards of good taste that had prevailed in the age of Louis XIV

(Leben, 2004, pp.25–6; see also d'Enfert, 2003, pp.35–42).

All such arguments contributed to the foundation of some forty drawing schools in French towns and cities during the second half of the century, with a significant concentration in centres of textile production (d'Enfert, 2003, p.19). Many of these schools were supported by the local authorities or by private benefactors in order to ensure that the training they offered was accessible to the poor (Benhamou, 1993, pp.90–112; d'Enfert, 2003, pp.11–10, pp.31–4; Lahalle, 2006). All of the students attended on a part-time basis, often pursuing their study of drawing alongside an apprenticeship in a trade; a crucial part of the schools' purpose was to foster skills that traditional apprenticeships failed to teach (d'Enfert, 2003, pp.43–4; Lahalle, 2006, pp. 23, 201–2). Although the drawing schools were largely aimed at artisans and workers, the training that they provided did not differ radically from that offered by the *Académie*. The drawing masters were mostly painters with an academic background, like Jean-Baptiste Descamps, who founded one of the earliest such schools in Rouen in 1741 and later wrote a treatise on their utility (Henry-Gobet, 2001). Another was the aforementioned Ferrand de Monthelon, who was recruited by the city of Reims to teach drawing there in 1748 (d'Enfert, 2003, p.39; Lahalle, 2006, p.165). It should be noted that the curriculum did not entirely conform to academic norms; drawing after the life model was only permitted in the few schools affiliated to the *Académie* and reserved to an elite of students aspiring to become artists, whether professional or amateur (Benhamou, 1993, p.95; d'Enfert, 2003 p.60; Lahalle, 2006, p.17, pp.49–50).

However, the training that the drawing schools provided for would-be artisans largely conformed to academic norms insofar as it accorded a central role to the human figure, which was copied from models in the form of prints, drawings or casts. Although the other two elements of drawing mentioned by Blondel in his *Encyclopédie* essay, namely architecture and ornament, also featured in the curriculum, they often did so in a subsidiary way (d'Enfert, 2003, pp.65–6; Lahalle, 2006, p.243). Both provided skills useful to the building trades, but ornament (which included flower drawing) was the element with most direct relevance to the training of artisans, particularly those destined for the textile industry (d'Enfert, 2003, pp.55–6, 74–6). In 1762, for example, a drawing school in Lille explained in its prospectus how the worker would benefit from attending the school: 'he will there draw flowers, fruit, trees, plants, foliage, which produce the most beautiful effect on fabrics and gives them brilliance and taste

... which makes them desirable to our neighbours' (quoted in Lahalle, 2006, pp.76, 220; cf. statements quoted in Lahalle, 2006, pp.67, 71). The importance of a foundation in flower drawing for a career in the textile industry was likewise emphasised in a work of 1765, *Le Dessinateur pour les étoffes d'or, d'argent et de soie*, by a Lyonnais silk designer, Antoine-Nicolas Joubert de l'Hiberdie (Miller, 2004; Scott & Clifford, 2004, p.3).

Nevertheless, the drawing schools' emphasis on freehand drawing skills at the expense of technical training gave rise to criticisms, both at the time and subsequently, that they failed to equip students with the professional skills needed by manufacturers (Lahalle, 2006, pp.288–90; Chisick, 1977, p.53; Benhamou, 1993, p.111; Miller, 1998). Certainly, this type of training gave way during the first half of the nineteenth century to a new geometric method of drawing more closely geared to the requirements of industry (d'Enfert, 2003); it was dubbed, by some exponents at least, *dessin industriel* (Normand, Douliot & Krafft, 1833).² However, it would be reductive to characterise drawing as it was taught in eighteenth-century France merely as a staging post on the road that leads to the inevitable invention of design in the modern sense. For one thing, the very terms of the argument involve a certain Anglocentrism, given that, as has already been noted, French lacks a separate word for design as distinct from drawing. Arguably, moreover, identifying design with industrial mass production may make sense in a British context, given Britain's primacy in the 'Industrial Revolution' of the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century, but less so in the case of France, where, during this period as still to some extent today, the economic advantage lay in relatively small-scale production of luxury goods, most obviously fashion, with a reputation for style and taste (as indicated by the drawing school prospectus quoted in the previous paragraph). Recent scholarship has underlined the importance of fashion and other luxury industries to the rise and triumph of capitalism in France (Sewell, 2010). In any case, as the most detailed studies of eighteenth-century French drawing schools have emphasised, whatever the limitations of the training that they offered, these institutions need to be assessed with reference to the specific artistic, economic, social and cultural context that shaped them (d'Enfert, 2003, pp.35–6, 46–7; Lahalle, 2006, pp.292–4).

2 It has been claimed that the term, *dessinateur industriel*, dates back to the eighteenth century (Benhamou, 1993, p.91). In fact, however, the ultimate source for this statement is a late nineteenth-century work, which refers to one Charles-François Delahaye, who worked in Paris in the 1770s, as being 'what we would call today a *dessinateur industriel*' (Guiffrey, 1886, p.64).

Overall, it can be said that the transformation of *dessein* into *dessin* in France during the eighteenth century involved a significant shift from a theoretical to a practical orientation. Exemplary in this respect is the *École Royale Gratuite de Dessin* (Royal Free Drawing School), which was established in Paris in 1766 (just at the point when the new spelling was being increasingly widely adopted). As its name suggests, the school benefited from royal support; it was funded by special taxes, one of which was levied on the Parisian guilds, whenever a contract was issued for an apprentice or a master received into the guild. The school's founder, Jean-Jacques Bachelier, a painter who had trained at the *Académie* and then worked at the Royal Porcelain Manufactory, endeavoured to ensure that the training equipped students with the skills needed for porcelain manufacture, textile production and other luxury trades based in and around the city (Leben, 1993, 2004). Although the curriculum was divided into the same three branches of drawing as elsewhere, the starting point of the whole programme of study was instruction in the 'elementary principles of geometry', which, according to Bachelier, constituted 'the basis

of every mechanical art' (1792, pp.6–7, 10). No less significant was the strict timetable, with classes taking place in shifts, which reportedly made it possible to accommodate as many as 500 students per day (far more than in other schools); each student had an allocated seat where he would copy prints under glass in locked frames (Fig. 2.3) (Leben, 2004, p.77; Lasalle, 2006, p.121, table 7). The innovative character of Bachelier's enterprise is also attested by his attempt during the 1780s to extend the training to girls (also unprecedented), though the French Revolution seems to have put paid to his plans (Leben, 2004, pp.57–61).

Having gone through many reconfigurations and several changes of name, Bachelier's school (which finally became fully co-educational in 1949) survives today as the *École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs*. As with design, the origins of the notion of the 'decorative arts' can be traced back to the eighteenth century, though it was not until 1877 that the term made its appearance in a French dictionary (Lavezzi, 2005, p.175); the school was renamed the same year. By contrast to design, however, the decorative arts are associated with artisanal, pre-



Figure 2.3. *Ecole Gratuite de dessin* classroom in the former Anatomy Theatre of Saint-Côme in the rue des Cordeliers, Paris, probably drawn by an instructor, after 1776. Pencil on paper; 26.5 x 38.4cm. Cabinet de Dessin, Musée Carnavalet, Paris. (Image credit: © Musée Carnavalet/Roger Viollet)

industrial conditions of production, as well as with luxury and ornament as opposed to modernist simplicity and functionalism; when it gained currency around 1900, the term already had a nostalgic quality, looking back to the past, not least to the eighteenth century (Scott, 2005, p. 137). Whereas tensions between the type of instruction provided by the *École Nationale des Arts Décoratifs* (as it was known until 1925) and the demands of manufacturers for a strictly technical training persisted during this later period, the school (which adopted a strictly rational, geometric method of drawing in the 1870s) helped to train a new generation of ‘artist-decorators’ who challenged the routine production of French industry by seeking to imbue their work with a new stylistic unity (Froissart-Pezzone, 2000).³ This unity is exemplified by art nouveau, which, it may be noted, derived much of its inspiration from the eighteenth-century French style known as the rococo (Silverman, 1989). French investment (both actual and symbolic) in the decorative arts as distinct from design, not just in the late nineteenth century but right up to the 1950s, can no doubt partly be understood as a reaction formation, reflecting France’s economic backwardness by comparison with more industrialised nations such as Germany and its resistance to the rise of international modernism as exemplified by the Bauhaus (Silverman, 1989; Troy 1991; Laurent, 2019). However, as indicated above, it can also be seen as a strategy of playing to the nation’s particular strengths and, moreover, one that embodies an alternative conception of what it means to be modern (Silverman, 1909; Troy, 1991; Lasc, Downey & Taylor, 2015).

In short, seeking the origins of design by considering the case of eighteenth-century France is a somewhat perverse endeavour. Not only does French lack any single word for design, but France in this period is more often associated with another term, the decorative arts, which stands in contrast to design. Nevertheless, the theory and practice of *dessein/ dessin*, as it existed in eighteenth-century France, can perhaps be aligned with the project of elaborating a more nuanced and expansive understanding of design, one that is as much concerned with art as with industry. Such a project was formulated by Jacques Viénot, previously the head of an interior decoration

company, who, in 1951, founded an *Institut d’Esthétique Industrielle* (Institute of Industrial Aesthetics) with the aim of promoting a distinctively French approach that married art and commerce, beauty and technology; as the institute’s name suggests, Viénot considered the word ‘design’ to be an intolerable anglicism (Le Boeuf, 2006; Vial, 2017, pp. 13–24). Whether or not this really amounts to a distinctively different approach from design as such may be doubted. Still, as regards the eighteenth century, an emblematic figure would be Philippe de Lasalle (1723–1804), who, as the textile and fashion historian Lesley Ellis Miller has demonstrated (2005), achieved great success in the Lyons silk industry through a self-conscious union of art and commerce; significantly, Lasalle catered both to the demand for high-end, exclusive designs and large-scale production of more day-to-day fabrics and was, moreover, highly adept at marketing his products, not least by highlighting his own role as designer. Moreover, Lasalle’s wide-ranging achievement was recognised as such by his contemporaries, who hailed him as a *dessinateur* (draughtsman/designer), capable of great feats of artistry, as well as an inventor, machinist, manufacturer and businessman.

3 From this, it is clear that geometric methods of drawing were not necessarily better adapted to the demands of industry than an academic or figurative approach. What is at issue here is rather a narrowly instrumental emphasis on technical training as opposed to a commitment to bringing the ideals and standards of fine art to bear on what are variously called the decorative, applied or industrial arts (see also Froissart, 2014).

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