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Douglas Fordham. *British Art and the Seven Years' War: Allegiance and Autonomy.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. xiii + 334 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4243-0.

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The fact that the front cover of Douglas Fordham's monograph, *British Art and the Seven Years' War*, shows a detail from Hogarth's *March to Finchley*, a work completed in 1750 about the events of the 1745 Jacobite Rising, and thus with at best peripheral relevance to the Seven Years' War itself, ought to prompt the suspicion that this book is about more than the title alone suggests. And indeed, Fordham has set himself an ambitious and mighty task, which is effectively the reconsideration of the whole of eighteenth-century British art, through emphasizing the period and events of the Seven Years' War as its overwhelmingly important crux, and the lens through which the visual culture of the surrounding decades must be viewed in order to begin the process of mapping art and culture onto a fervid and enormously complex political–and above all, imperial–culture. That he achieves this without either falling into a whiggish subordination of the visual sphere to a dominant political history, or treating the relationship of art to the fiscal-military state as merely an offshoot of the now comfortable orthodoxies of civic humanism as the measure by which visual culture is to be tailored to the wider socioeconomic sphere, is a testament both to his exhaustive scholarship and his methodological sophistication. This is undoubtedly a book first and foremost about art and art history (despite the quality of the illustrations, which in many cases is inadequate to the nuanced and complex readings of them: this is surely an editorial, rather than an authorial, decision by the press, based on cost, and is unfortunate): so it ranges, in a somewhat deceptively conventional fashion, from the "birth" of an English school of art at the Foundling Hospital displays, through print culture, portraiture, the foundation of the Royal Academy, to a concluding discussion of visual representation and the American Revolution. Yet, within this overarching span the foregrounding of the Seven Years' War and art's relation to the fiscal-military state makes this an innovative and provocative book.

As Fordham notes, there is a "striking asymmetry" between the profusion of historical literature on this period and "art-historical writing in which the Seven Years' War has barely registered" (p. 258, n. 14); which in itself is glaring evidence of the ideological biases that have conventionally underpinned art-historical approaches to eighteenth-century British art, in marginalizing the consideration of war and empire. It is astonishing that there has been no significant in-depth study of this subject hitherto, given that the war provided a major context for artistic production and its theorization in Britain, with the establishment at the same time of

the significantly titled Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, the exhibiting Society of Artists and Free Society of Artists, and the competitive and highly politicized negotiations leading towards the foundation of the Royal Academy in 1768. Even David Solkin's groundbreaking study, *Painting for Money*, which covers almost exactly the same time-frame (and of which, therefore, Fordham's book might be seen as a critique), neatly sidesteps a full engagement with the war and its implications by shifting its focus instead onto the more insular subject of Vauxhall Gardens and its exhibiting culture.[1] In Fordham's convincing terms, the Seven Years' War becomes the principal context, and unavoidable filter, for understanding British art and the creation of what came to be regarded as a distinctively "English school" in the middle decades of the century, whereby art was informed at all levels by the changing discourses of war and empire, and was a determining factor in the consequent transition from a mercantile to an imperial aesthetic. Thus the visual arts are not treated as merely a secondary accompaniment to the major events of imperial history: Fordham's analysis is more subtle than that. Artists, he demonstrates, were political animals, integrated at all levels of genre and medium with their wider political culture, and thus responsive to urgent but ephemeral and more demotic forms of visual culture, such as prints, transparencies, or the urban spectacles associated with major events such as the king's coronation, leading to a fascinating discussion of the highly meaningful decoration of the state coach. These important but elusive forms of visual culture are not ones conventionally addressed by art historians, but through reference to the Seven Years' War here they are tied in dynamic ways to high art and its theorization, instead of treated as separate spheres of cultural production (an art-historical approach that might be seen itself as ultimately deriving from this critical moment in the articulation and classification of British art, and thus ironically adopting the very terms of the discourse it seeks to analyze); so that, for example, William Hogarth loses his mythological status as a solitary pioneer of a quintessentially "English" art, and key texts such as Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses* (176-91) can be seen to emerge not simply from the isolated sanctum of the academy, but out of the fervent popular political culture of the war and subsequent Wilkite ideology.

In one sense, then, Fordham's attempt to locate art as part of a popular, urban, and imperial political culture mirrors Kathleen Wilson's reassessment of eighteenth-century popular politics, and to that extent, this book may be seen as a welcome expansion of the "new imperial history" into the field of visual culture.[2] However, like Wilson's *Sense of the People*, this is a very Atlantic-oriented understanding of empire, in which India and the East receive barely a mention. Historians of empire have long argued that Vincent Harlow's concept of a "first" and "second" British empire, to which Fordham subscribes as one "with significant interpretative potential for the history of British art" (p. 22), is a decisively Atlantic-based one.[3] This perhaps overdetermines the chronological parameters of the book and occasionally skews its interpretative analyses. In discussing Francis Hayman's celebratory war-themed canvases for Vauxhall Gardens, for example, Fordham perceptively observes, as it were, a horizontal symmetry at play between monarchy and trade in the images' ideological meaning, but makes nothing of the perhaps more obvious vertical symmetry between East and West in their iconography: the development of a mercantile empire in India was evidently just as much a part of Hayman's "imperial consciousness" as colonial America, and to sideline Robert Clive's establishment of the East India Company as the instrument of imperial rule in Bengal from 1765 is to underplay a crucial aspect of imperial culture in the 1760s, such that the Atlantic empire here comes to stand for empire in total. The inclusion of a thoughtful, though not entirely convincing, reading of Reynolds' portrait of the Pacific Islander Omai, whom James Cook brought back to London on the return of his second voyage in 1775, seems in part an attempt to compensate for this imbalance, but sits uneasily with the dominant transatlantic focus of the rest of the book. Similarly, perhaps the key factor underpinning the political economy of the Atlantic empire, that is, the slave trade, while occasionally coming to the surface, remains in the background of Fordham's account, though his overall analysis is alert to its importance, as he notes in the introduction. Arguably (as the author does indeed argue), these do not form part of the book's principal concerns, and to include detailed attention to them would be to complicate further an already dizzyingly complex history of the interrelationship between art, politics, and empire, which the book manages with a truly impressive breadth of scholarship and refined analytical skill. This is in no way, then, a properly postcolonial intervention into eighteenth-century British art history–that has yet to be written–but it is a powerful, ambitious, deeply informed, and very welcome move towards placing empire at the center, rather than the periphery, of British art and its institutionalization in the eighteenth century.

Notes

[1]. David Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

[2]. Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Wilson, ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[3]. For example, Philip Lawson, "The Missing Link: The Imperial Dimension in Understanding Hanoverian Britain," *The Historical Journal* 29, no. 3 (1986): 747-51.

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