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MERCURE DE FRANCE, 1672-1810



Published from 1672, this influential periodical promised in its first issue to chronicle the activities of luminaries in metropolitan Paris, in the French provinces, and abroad, and to offer good literature to lovers of novels and stories. It was published first under the title *Mercure Galant* by Donneau de Visé. In 1724 the title was changed to *Mercure de France*, and the periodical was split into a literary and a political section. This collection provides an unprecedented primary source in which the cultural representations of layers of the French elite and academics can be explored over more than one hundred and thirty-five years in which the modern European world was truly born.

Date Range: 1672-1810

Content: 300,081 images

Source Library: Library of Congress

Detailed Description:

Historian Elena Russo has written that in ancien régime France, "where political argument was severely curtailed, aesthetic debates were loaded with political implications" (Russo, p.3). It is in this context, which coalesced in the late 17th century, in which a critic and writer of farces and vaudevilles, Jean Donneau de Visé launched *Mercure galant* (later *Mercure De France*) in 1672. On the one hand, *Mercure's* offerings of news about elite fashion, art, food, politics, manners, sonnets, madrigals, and court life "in a light and agreeable form" (Harvey, p. 474) dovetailed with the efforts of Louis XIV and his finance minister Colbert to build up France as Europe's supplier of luxury goods (DeJean, p. 278). On the other hand, as France's first and most widely circulated journal, it helped literary criticism to escape from the closed circles of professional male writers, allowed it to become "a public and feminine affair," and contributed, however circuitously, to the creation of the "public" and the revolutionary shift in *mentalité* upon the Enlightenment was founded. (Russo, pp. 9-10). That is, the "public," over the course of its long life, grew from the elegant salon to the tumultuous and prerevolutionary "nation" (Russo, p. 10).

In 1724, the *Mercure galant* became the *Mercure de France* and grew to become the most important literary journal in prerevolutionary France (Popkin, p. 146). The aesthetic discourse

in its pages, like such discourse in other publications of the highly censored nation (Russo, p. 3), was a means to debate all kinds of cultural, moral, and political questions. *Mercure galant* had the favor of Louis XIV but *Mercure de France* was more official, its editor being appointed by the government and its profits devoted to a fund for the pensions for men of letters. The editorship was held by, among others, Thomas Corneille, who completed a dictionary of arts and sciences for the Academie Française and Marmontel, an encyclopédiste known to owe his position to the intervention of Madame du Pompadour. *Mercure de France* remained central during the mid-century debates that erupted around the publication and suppression of the *Encyclopédie* and the arguments between the philosophes and the defenders of "public" and modern taste.

At the time of the French Revolution, *Mercure* was being published by Charles-Joseph Panckoucke, a businessman who became a major newspaper entrepreneur, operating a print shop, likely the largest in France, with twenty-seven presses and ninety-one workers (Popkin, p. 145). According to the *Oxford Companion to French Literature*, it was little molested during the Revolution, suppressed by Napoleon from 1811-1815, and reborn as a favorite publication of the middle class constitutionalist party during the Bourbon Restoration. It ceased publication in 1820. Thus, students and researchers will find in this collection an unprecedented primary source in which the cultural representations of layers of the French elite and academics can be explored over more than one hundred and thirty-five years in which the modern European world was truly born.

Sources:

DeJean, Joan. *Essence of Style: How the French Invented High Fashion, Fine Food, Chic Cafés, Style, Sophistication, and Glamour*. New York: Free Press, 2005.

Harvey, Paul and J. E. Haseltine, Compilers and editors. "*Mercure galant*" and "Marmontel," *Oxford Companion to French Literature*. London, Oxford University Press, 1959.

Popkin, Jeremy D. "Journals: The New Face of the News," in Darnton, *Revolution in Print: The Press in France, 1775-1800*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. p. 141-164.

Russo, Elena. *Styles of Enlightenment: Taste, Politics, and Authorship in Eighteenth-Century France*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2007.